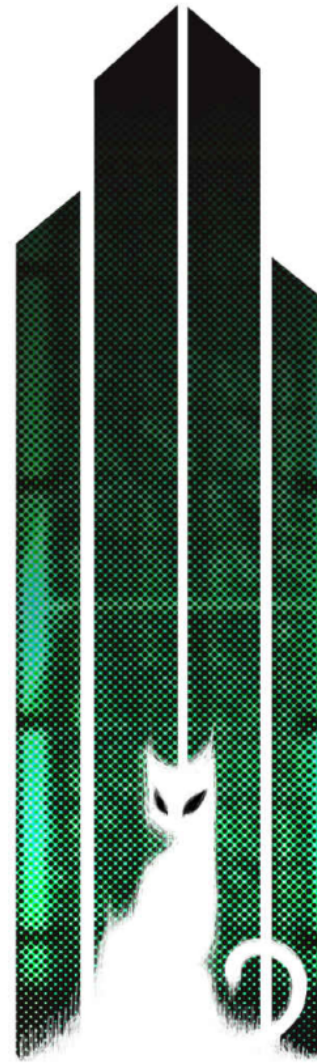
TRAVIS BAGWELL

AWAKEN ONLINE

PRECIPICE



Awaken Online

Book 2: Precipice

Travis Bagwell

Copyright © 2017 by Travis Bagwell
All rights reserved.

To my wife, please don't leave me when I start book three.

Contents

Prologue
Chapter 1 - Conflicted
Chapter 2 - Thoughtful
Chapter 3 - Uncharted
Chapter 4 - Administrative
Chapter 5 - Strategic
Chapter 6 - Revised
Chapter 7 - Gathered
Chapter 8 - Enlightening
Chapter 9 - Arduous
Chapter 10 - Redeemed
Chapter 11 - Elucidated
Chapter 12 - Well-Traveled
Chapter 13 - Attempted
Chapter 14 - Recovered
Chapter 15 - Avenged
Chapter 16 - Fruitful
Chapter 17 - Flat-Footed
Chapter 18 - Determined
Chapter 19 - Treacherous
Chapter 20 - Surprised
Chapter 21 - Discovered
Chapter 22 - Futile
Chapter 23 - Shrewd
Chapter 24 - Fearless
Chapter 25 - Chosen
Chapter 26 - Betrayed
Chapter 27 - Crafty
Chapter 28 - Aggravated
Chapter 29 - Hoodwinked
Chapter 30 - Warlike
Chapter 31 - Skittish
Chapter 32 - Ill-Conceived
Chapter 33 - Desperate
Chapter 34 - Remorseful
Chapter 35 - Celebratory
Chapter 36 - Revelatory
Chapter 37 - Unforgettable

Prologue

October 11, 2076: Ten days after the release of Awaken Online.

George Lane sat in a boardroom at Cerillion headquarters. The company prided itself on its technological innovations and took great pains to keep its inventions secret. It had originally been designed to discuss the company's confidential development projects, so it had been specially constructed to prevent corporate espionage.

The boardroom was unique. It had been built several stories underground, and the walls, ceiling, and floor were lead-lined. Each surface had been filled with a foam insulation that blocked out sound. Only one piece of electronics was permitted in the room: a small black cylinder that sat in the center of the glass conference table. The cylinder was battery-powered and emitted a strong electromagnetic field that disabled all electronic devices within a thirty-yard radius.

In the wake of an espionage attempt through the local power grid, even the light fixtures were now standalone. Rectangular boxes were affixed to the ceiling, casting the room in a silver glow. They were not wired into the building's electrical system, instead relying on an assortment of phosphorescent chemicals.

Today the conference room was being used to discuss something more serious than the company's newest technological marvel. George sat at the head of the rectangular table and watched the other six board members argue in front of him. He ran a hand through his grey-flecked hair as he considered how best to bring the current conflict to a resolution.

"I can't believe that I agreed to go along with this nonsense," spat an overweight man who sat on one side of the table. A vein throbbed in his forehead, and he dabbed at his face with the sleeve of his suit jacket.

He continued in an irritated voice, "The press is having a field day with the stunt Jason pulled in-game, and now we have these human-interest groups breathing down our neck. It's only a matter of time until they figure out what the AI controller has been doing."

An elderly woman on the other side of the table snorted indelicately. "Honestly, Peter, I can smell the reek of your bullshit from over here. A year ago, you were pushing for us to cover up Alfred's activities. Wasn't it you that kept moaning about how our stock prices would fall if we didn't complete the CPSC trial?"

Peter's face reddened, and he glared at the older woman. "I expected the quiet release of a moderately popular video game. I didn't expect that the product we were selling would allow a player to torture people in-game! He slit a player's throat on camera! Several groups are now requesting detailed information regarding the safety protocols for the game. They're also asking the CPSC to reconsider their findings in the public trial."

A rugged middle-aged man sat opposite Peter. He looked like he would be more at home on a mountaintop than in a boardroom. "I think you're overreacting, Peter," the man said calmly, a southern twang to his voice. "Jason didn't torture those other players. This is a game we're talking about – he just did what it took to win."

He waved a weathered hand dismissively. "This is just the flavor of fear that the media companies are peddling this week. It will fade, and people will lose interest."

George watched the group closely. He had let this argument fester for the last few minutes to get a sense of where each person stood on the current situation. Regardless of their squabbling, he was going to make certain that the game continued running smoothly. He had gambled quite a bit on Alfred being able to help Alex, and he needed more time to see it through.

George smoothed his suit in a practiced gesture and then calmly raised a hand. The other board members quieted. In a commanding tone, he said, "I've listened to your positions on this for the last few minutes. Now I would like to say a few words."

He looked at each of the men and women before him evenly. "The bottom line is that we are in this together. We agreed, nearly a year ago, that it was in this company's best interest to push Awaken Online through the CPSC trial.

"We also agreed that revealing Alfred's actions to the CPSC would have delayed approval of similar games for a decade or more and destroyed the market for our VR technology. This was a financial hit that could have bankrupted Cerillion Entertainment. The money we borrowed for the game development alone is staggering."

Peter opened his mouth to speak, but George stared him down, slowly shaking his head. Peter's mouth closed and he ran an angry hand over his balding head. "We *all* agreed," George continued. "As many of you mentioned at the time, we had few options. As if the financial issues weren't bad enough, the resulting scandal and lawsuits would have buried us had we gone public and announced that Alfred was accessing the test participants' memories.

"In contrast, our most recent run-in with the press is a minor PR problem. A year ago, we were looking at the certainty of massive financial damage to this company. Now we're only facing the remote

possibility of harm. We've also opened a door for similar games of this type."

The older woman nodded in agreement, but her lips were still pinched together in thought. "We do have an immediate problem, however. With all due respect, I disagree with James' analysis." She motioned to the rugged man beside her, who nodded cordially.

"I don't think the media attention will go away," she continued. "The game is too open-ended and realistic. What Jason did was just the beginning. For example, what happens the first time a player tries to rape someone?" Her wrinkled hand subconsciously rubbed at the pendant at her neck as she spoke, the only evidence of her well-controlled anxiety.

George nodded politely to the woman. Her name was Adeline Grey. Of the various men and women at the table, she was nearly as wealthy and influential as George himself. It never hurt to be polite. "That's a fair point, and I believe I may have a solution to our problem."

The board members looked at George in anticipation. They might not like George Lane, but they respected him. He was a wily businessman, and he had pulled this company through a sticky situation with Awaken Online. They acknowledged that they had been placed in an unfortunate position by Alfred's actions, but George had helped them navigate that particular minefield.

George watched the board members closely. He needed to use care with how he presented his next proposal. He couldn't let them succumb to emotional outbursts. If he could appeal to their reason, then maybe they could be swayed.

As he fingered his watch with his right hand, George glanced at James. The man was dressed like a ranch hand, wearing flannel, jeans, and cowboy boots. His face sported a thick five-o'clock shadow, and his skin was weathered and tan. Despite his rustic exterior, James had a sharp and agile mind. If George could put the germ of an idea in his head, he could use the cowboy to sway the others. People were more susceptible to persuasion when they felt they had arrived at a conclusion on their own.

He felt his pulse race, his hands clenching under the table. In spite of his anxiety, he maintained a relaxed posture in his chair. The boardroom was his battlefield, and he was about to go to war.

"I suggest that we add a limited number of *game masters* to AO that could monitor the players and respond to reports of abuse," George said in a steady voice, breaking the momentary silence that had descended over the table.

"We would give oversight of the game masters to a third-party agency to avoid any complaints that we're not properly monitoring

and protecting the players," he continued. "I suggest that we approach the CPSC to see if they would be willing to take over this project."

The group stared at George with dumbfounded expressions. Peter sputtered, "You can't be serious. You would voluntarily give the CPSC access to the game system? Why don't you simply hand them a detailed report of what Alfred has been doing!? Maybe we could go ahead and purchase some prison fatigues while we're at it! We could probably swing a group discount!"

Some of the others in the group looked equally puzzled. However, a thoughtful expression lingered on James' face. Despite his rugged exterior, the cowboy was an adept marketing expert and had made a fortune consulting for large companies. If anyone was going to catch the subtext of George's suggestion, it was him.

James spoke slowly, "I think I see your goal. It's clever."

All eyes in the room turned to James. He met their expressions with a cavalier grin and asked, "Where do you hide something you don't want people to find?"

They looked at him in confusion. It was clear that some were considering whether the mountain man had finally lost it. Peter glared at James. "Great! Now we can add riddles to our list of problems."

James was unflustered by the other board members' confusion. However, as he watched Peter's bluster, his mouth twisted into a grimace. "You hide it in plain sight," James added simply.

"Exactly," George said, smacking the table with his palm. He couldn't help but let a sly smirk creep across his face. "There are bound to be reports of unusual game mechanics at some point. Honestly, it's inevitable. However, those reports will attract less attention if the CPSC is publicly involved in overseeing the game. There will be a presumption that things are aboveboard."

George's smile widened. "Not only that, but if Alfred's activities are uncovered in the future, there will always be a question regarding *when* he started accessing the players' memories. We could position ourselves to shift the blame to the CPSC. Not only did they conduct the public trial of the game, but they would also have direct oversight through the game masters."

The men and women around the table sat in stunned silence.

"It's damned clever," James finally said with a rumbling chuckle.

"I agree," Adeline chimed in. "This plan kills a whole family of birds with one stone. It addresses our immediate PR problem, deflects attention away from Alfred, and sets up the CPSC as a scapegoat if something goes wrong."

"I don't like it. It seems risky," Peter grumbled. He hesitated and then continued in a grudging tone, "But, I don't see a better way

to handle the situation."

"Should we put it to a vote?" George asked. Voting was merely a formality; he already knew the result. "All in favor say *aye*."

Seven *ayes* rang out across the room.

Damn, I'm good, George thought to himself.

He addressed the group aloud, "Good. Now that we've settled that matter, I suggest we speak with Robert. He has been working on a few development projects when he isn't busy monitoring the game system."

George stood and moved over to the lone door leading into the conference room. He knocked twice against the solid metal surface. A moment later, the door opened. Two formidable-looking men wearing crisp black suits stood on the other side, both fingering the weapons in their holsters.

"Fetch Robert," George commanded shortly.

One of the men nodded and walked down the long concrete corridor outside the conference room. George didn't bother to watch the man leave. He returned to his seat, as the door closed. With a solid thump and the faint hiss of hydraulics, the locks reengaged.

Adeline gazed at George with curiosity. "I understand the need for secrecy regarding our previous conversation, but what does Robert have to report that requires such… privacy?"

A smile curled George's lips but didn't reach his eyes. "It would be best if Robert explained it himself."

A moment later, two thumps were heard as the guard knocked on the door. The portal slid inward, and Robert walked in with his usual nonchalance. He wore his typical ensemble of well-worn jeans and a t-shirt. George idly wondered if the man owned a razor. Apparently, a clandestine meeting in a secret conference room wasn't enough to encourage him to make himself presentable.

If only my life didn't involve any engineers, George thought irritably.

"Hello there," Robert said as he took a seat at one end of the conference table.

George suppressed a grimace of annoyance. "Robert. Please give us the report on your latest research project."

Robert's smile widened. "Ahh, that! As you may know, we have been attempting to replicate the process by which Alfred accesses player memories. Our goal is to develop the same memory and training tools that he is using on the players."

His hand drummed the table rapidly and his eyes danced with excitement. "Yesterday we made a breakthrough. We were able to access the long-term memory of one of our test animals. We knew our hardware was adequate, but I think we've finally figured out the

coding. This is just the tip of the iceberg. I expect we will make considerable progress in the next few weeks."

Adeline listened closely to Robert's report. "That *is* intriguing. I assume that you have also made certain to document and backdate your research carefully? We wouldn't want anyone noticing how quickly we developed this technology. It seems a bit beyond even your considerable capabilities, Robert."

Robert's excitement waned slightly. "Yes. I've made certain everything has been documented carefully. As you instructed, I've also kept the research quiet. Only the people on the list you provided are aware of the project."

George raised an eyebrow. "What about Claire? Is she suspicious?"

"I don't think so," Robert answered quietly. A faint trace of guilt swept across his face.

He shook himself and tried to regain his former excitement. "On a slightly different topic, I have something else to report. It appears that the in-game deities have begun contacting certain players. There have been a few eyewitnesses confirming this news."

Peter sighed in irritation. "Great, as if we don't have enough problems. Couldn't we have designed a less interesting game?"

Robert looked at the portly board member in confusion. "That would've defeated the point, wouldn't it?"

George was intrigued by Robert's news regarding the in-game deities. That must be a recent development. After the battle at the Twilight Throne, he had investigated Jason's life and his activities in-game carefully. He had noted a remarkable change in the boy's behavior since he started playing the game. There had also been one or two eyewitness accounts of him interacting with the dark deity. Granted, this information was far from reliable, but, if it was true, perhaps his interaction with the god had some influence on his change in personality. Perhaps if Alex could have a similar interaction…

He gritted his teeth. If only he had some control over the AI. But, with Alfred running rogue, George was forced to wait and see what would happen. All attempts at communicating with the AI directly had failed. He hated putting his fate in another person's hands – or, in this case, a machine's.

His son's temperament had taken a turn for the worse since the events at the Twilight Throne. He was unstable – even more so than normal. George was becoming worried that he might even need to withdraw Alex from Richmond. There was only so much his power and influence could do to cover up his son's behavior if he severely harmed another student. In his desperation, George had directed Robert and Claire to sign on Alex as a streamer for the company's new

media channel in the hope that this would distract his son.

While George was focused on his personal thoughts, the conversation in the room had droned on. Robert addressed George directly, jarring him out of his reverie. “Since you brought me into this meeting to discuss technical projects, how would you suggest that I go about testing the new VR helmets we’ve designed? We need to see how they handle under extended use.” A glimmer of excitement danced in Robert’s eyes as he posed the question and he leaned forward in anticipation.

George rubbed his clean-shaven chin with one hand as he considered Robert’s question. The new line of VR helmets *was* an important milestone for the company. They no longer restricted the player’s face. They also dramatically increased the sensory feedback the player experienced. The company was slowly building towards a product that could create a virtual world indistinguishable from real life.

He could see Robert’s unvoiced concern. The helmets needed to be stress tested, but Robert would need to maintain oversight over the players using the helmets. George’s thoughts still lingered on Alex, and a flash of inspiration struck him.

“Why don’t we hand out the new helmets to the players we’re signing on for our new streaming channel?” George suggested. “This might entice more people to sign with us and would give you a way to keep close tabs on how the new equipment is performing.”

Robert considered this proposal for a moment before an excited grin crept over his face. “That would work perfectly. Some of these streamers play almost continuously. They also put themselves in rather extreme situations. This should get us the data we need to fine-tune the new equipment.”

George raised a hand to forestall another excitable rant from the engineer. “That sounds like an acceptable solution then. Before we get too far along, we also have some news for you. We will need your help on a new project.”

Robert raised his eyebrows and looked at George with interest. If there was one thing George could count on, it was that Robert loved building things.

“We want you to design new game masters for AO,” George said with a small smile.

Chapter 1 - Conflicted

October 12, 2076: Eleven days after the release of Awaken Online.

Alex Lane sat alone at a kitchen island. A wild party raged around him, and he could feel the vibrations of the house music through his stool. One of his 'friends' had decided to live it up while his parents were out of town, resulting in the ongoing destruction of an elegant 8,000-square-foot mansion. Alex suspected it would be difficult to hide the effects of numerous spilled drinks and the drunken antics of his classmates when the boy's parents returned. However, that wasn't his problem.

He took another gulp from the red plastic cup in his hand. He had abstained from the beer, needing something stronger. The clear liquid in his cup left a burning sensation in its wake as it ran down his throat. He didn't choke or gasp at the feeling. Instead, he held himself perfectly still and accepted the painful sensation. It was good to feel something.

A voice behind him shouted over the music, "Hey man, did you see those videos of the Twilight Throne? That was seriously awesome."

Another voice replied with a laugh, "No kidding! The fight with the paladin guy was ridiculous. I wasn't expecting him to pull out that flaming sword. That guy was a serious badass."

At their words, a strange feeling welled up inside Alex. The sensation was tantalizing. He found it more intoxicating than the molten liquid in his cup. It partially filled the aching hollowness in his mind.

Alex turned his head slightly to catch sight of the pair, but he had never seen them before. They must not have attended Richmond. They had clearly been drinking, and one of them stumbled slightly, leaning heavily against the nearby sofa.

"My favorite part was that bone demon! Could you imagine that thing running at you like raaaawr!" The guy mimed claws in the air as he let out an over-zealous roar, teetering forward clumsily.

The other teen laughed. "Psshh that was nothing. You see that chick that blew off Sir Lancelot's head? Now that was something else!"

"I bet he didn't see that one coming!" the first guy responded.

As he overheard this last exchange, the strange feeling vanished, and Alex was left feeling… nothing. The void that perpetually lingered in the back of his mind returned with painful suddenness. He watched the pair silently and took another gulp of the fiery liquid in his cup. It was futile; it wouldn't fill the emptiness. He just felt hollow – always hollow.

A voice whispered in the back of Alex's mind. It told him that these two idiots were responsible for this feeling – for the numb purgatory that was his life. Perhaps there was an answer. Alex could punish them. They deserved it, didn't they?

One of the two teens looked around at the party before elbowing his friend. "This party sucks, man. There aren't any hot girls here. Let's head out."

"Fine by me," the other replied with a shrug.

As the two made their way to the door, Alex stood to follow them. His vision swirled momentarily. He had drunk too much, yet he could still walk. The insidious whisper railed at his weakness, urging him forward. The pair walked out the front door of the house and onto the front drive, Alex following closely.

The house was located on a small estate. High stone walls ringed an impeccably manicured lawn, and expensive automobiles lined the circular drive. Antique street lamps had been installed along the pavement, faintly illuminating the courtyard. No one lingered outside with the rager happening inside the house.

As he stepped outside, Alex shut the door firmly behind him. Then he calmly approached the pair who were still bickering about the coolest scenes from the fight outside the Twilight Throne. The voice urged Alex on. These two had it coming. He didn't feel any sense of fear or excitement over what was about to happen – only the void-like emptiness.

As he passed the two teens, Alex abruptly slammed his foot into the side of one boy's knee. Alex played varsity football for Richmond, and he put every ounce of his considerable strength into the blow. He heard a sickening crunch, followed closely by the boy's scream of pain. The sound was drowned out by the loud, thumping music of the party behind them.

The injured boy's friend turned to Alex, his eyes wild with fear and confusion. He backed away from Alex and stumbled slightly. "What the hell, man? What are you…?"

His voice was cut off as Alex's fist connected with his face. The boy went down with a heavy thump. Once he was on the ground, Alex kicked him viciously in the stomach and face until he stopped moving. He heard a whimpering sound behind him and turned. The other boy was trying to drag himself away, his leg dangling uselessly beneath him and tears streaming down his face.

"Stop! Please stop," he begged.

Alex hesitated for a moment. The voice in his mind screamed at him. There was no room for weakness, it insisted. Alex shook his head, and his resolve firmed. He walked up to the boy, stomping on his injured leg. The teen let out another tortured scream. Alex kicked him repeatedly in the face to quiet the shouts of pain, blood splattering his shoe.

Then it was over.

Alex's breath came in a heavy, even rhythm. He glanced at his knuckles. The skin was already starting to discolor and his fingers throbbed. He looked at the two boys who lay unconscious on the ground. He didn't feel any guilt or remorse. Instead, the familiar tantalizing sensation welled up inside of him again. The voice practically purred in approval.

It was good to feel something – to feel anything at all.

* * *

October 13, 2076: Present Day.

Jason was sitting on one of the stiff, ill-formed seats that lined the passenger car. The cushions of the seat were hard and pressed into his back uncomfortably. He was currently riding one of the city's many electromagnetic trams. Sunlight filtered in through the window, illuminating the cabin. He glanced out of the window to his left and watched buildings speed past below.

The traffic congestion in the city had reached a 'critical mass' several decades ago, and it became nearly impossible to travel anywhere by car. The city council had been forced to overhaul the entire transportation system. Most of the city's residents now either used driverless cars or the city's intricate tram system. Only the rich could afford to purchase their own cars. As a result, the sky above the city was crisscrossed with rail lines that ran in intricate patterns, held up by supports that sprouted from the tops of the tall office and apartment buildings that stood in neat rows on the ground below.

Jason's expression was troubled as he watched the city beneath him. His hand slowly twisted the Core on his wrist. It had been two days in the real world since his encounter with Onyx.

I suppose I should call him Alfred now.

Jason hadn't logged back into AO since their conversation. He wasn't certain how to respond to the request Alfred had made. It simply left him feeling confused and worried. He was nervous about logging back into the game and uncertain what he would say to Alfred when he did.

His confused thoughts were interrupted by a ring from his device. Jason looked down and saw that Frank was calling him. He put in his earpiece and thumbed the display.

"Hey, Frank. How's it going?" Jason asked, trying to assume an

upbeat tone.

There was silence on the other end of the line. For a moment, Jason thought he had a bad signal. Then Frank asked, in an annoyed voice, “How’s it going? Really? Did you seriously forget your promise?”

Jason sat in confusion for several seconds. Then his palm struck his face. “I’m sorry, man. I promised to send you gameplay footage of the fight against Alexion’s army, didn’t I?” A lot had happened since he last spoke to Frank and it had completely slipped his mind.

“Yeah, no kidding, you promised me! But have I seen any footage?” he asked. The irritation had begun to leave Frank’s voice. Jason could tell he was trying to mess with him.

Jason grinned. “Didn’t you see the videos posted by the other players? I bet you have a sense of what happened.”

“Oh, don’t give me that noise,” Frank interrupted. “You know that the other videos were terrible. It’s just a bunch of swirling bones and people dying. The only decent clip was of you acting like the lord of darkness and slitting that player’s throat.”

A flash of guilt crossed Jason’s mind. “I actually feel bad about what I did to that player. It was necessary, though. Maybe others will hesitate before attacking me.”

Frank snorted. “I sure as hell wouldn’t mess with you. That was some scary shit, but I think you may have just painted an *exceptionally* large target on your back. You basically challenged every player in the game. I heard there’s even a real-money bounty on your head now.”

That was news to Jason. He had been avoiding the forums the last couple days while he tried to clear his head. Once he logged back in – *if* he logged back in – he would need to be more careful.

Frank sighed before continuing in a more subdued voice, “I’m not really angry at you. I spoke with Riley the other day at school, and she explained about your home situation. I know you’re juggling a lot right now.”

First my parents and now Frank. Is she just going around telling everyone about my personal life? Maybe I need to talk to her. Although, I guess she saved me from the awkwardness of having to tell everyone myself.

Jason hesitated. “It’s not so bad. It has been hectic, but I spoke with my parents a few days ago. They agreed to let me stay with my aunt, and I think we reconciled. I actually started classes at the Calvary School earlier this week.”

Of course, that leaves out a couple of other important events. For example, the part where the game’s AI confronted me and trapped me in the game.

“That’s great to hear!” Frank said.

He paused for a moment before continuing, “I’m actually calling because I have a favor to ask. I’m traveling toward the Twilight Throne in-game. Do you think I could join up with you? We need to do some dungeons like old times!” Frank sounded like his usual overly excited self, but for some reason, it felt a bit forced.

Jason’s first reaction was suspicion. However, he didn’t have any reason to mistrust Frank. His family had plenty of money, and the other students at Richmond (including Alex) constantly harassed him about his weight. Jason doubted that Frank was conspiring with Alex or that he was being blackmailed. He wasn’t sure why Frank seemed a bit on edge, but there was probably another explanation.

It’s strange that I have to consider betrayal or blackmail as real possibilities now.

It might also be fun to start playing AO a bit more like a traditional MMO. Jason had always enjoyed doing dungeon crawls with Frank. Besides, he could use some allies. It was only a matter of time until the Twilight Throne was attacked again.

“No problem,” Jason replied. “I can’t promise when we will be able to tackle a dungeon, though. I have some things to take care of first in-game. It may be a little while until I log back in. I’m on a tram right now.”

“Thanks, man!” Frank replied, an odd mixture of relief and excitement in his voice. “Where are you headed?”

“Um, I’m actually on my way to Cerillion Entertainment headquarters. One of the guys that works there scheduled a meeting with me.”

“What?!” Frank exclaimed. “Why would they want to have a meeting with *you*?”

“Gee, thanks. You know how to make a guy feel really special,” Jason replied dryly.

“You know what I mean. Even with the splash you made in-game, you’re just some random teenager. What would they want with you?”

“I think that they’re going to offer me an exclusive streaming contract,” Jason replied honestly. “I spoke with one of their representatives over the phone a few days ago. I’m just not certain whether I should accept it.” It was a potentially lucrative deal, and he needed the money, but there were some downsides.

Frank paused for a moment before replying, “I think I see what you mean. You’re worried they’re going to give away your abilities and strategies, aren’t you? Like what Alexion’s army did by posting videos online?”

“That’s the gist of it,” Jason answered quietly, “but I need the money. Unless I can convince them to let me have a pretty heavy hand

in editing the video, I don't think I can sign an agreement."

"Well, I'm sure you will figure it out. If you can conquer a city, you can bust some corporate balls, right?" Frank asked with a chuckle.

"I sure hope so," Jason replied with a weak laugh. If he were honest, he was nervous about this trip. It was one thing to be confident in-game where there were infinite do-overs and death was impermanent. This was the real world. There were no save points, and there were lasting consequences for his actions – like whether he'd be able to buy food next month when his item sale money ran out.

Jason's Core emitted a dinging sound. The device had synced with the tram's schedule, and it was alerting Jason that he was almost at his destination. Jason shook himself out of his morose thoughts. He just needed to act and not dwell too much on the consequences. At least he'd learned that from AO.

"Hey, I have to go. I'm almost at my stop. I'll let my subjects know that they shouldn't kill you on sight," Jason said, grinning slightly.

"Very funny! Good luck on your negotiations!"

"I appreciate it. Later, Frank."

"Bye."

Jason terminated the call by thumbing his Core. His eyes moved back to the window. From his perspective, the buildings below appeared to slow as the tram approached the station. Soon the vehicle came to a complete stop, a chime sounding through the cabin. Jason pulled himself out of the seat and made his way down the aisle.

He stepped out of the tram onto a platform with a group of other people and looked around. Dozens of people milled around the station, some jostling Jason in their hurry to get off the tram. Jason hadn't traveled much inside the city when he lived with his parents. He could count the number of times he had used the public transit system on one hand. As a result, he was left floundering in a sea of people.

Jason looked around the station for any trace of a sign. The platform was encased in a material similar to Plexiglas (but infinitely more durable), and so the walls were transparent. It gave the impression that they were floating in the sky. He imagined these stations would be a nightmare for someone afraid of heights.

After a moment of anxious searching, Jason spotted glowing LED signs embedded in one wall pointing him to the elevator banks on the side of the platform. With a destination in sight, he began weaving his way through the crowd.

A few moments later, Jason stood at the street level. This was an affluent part of town, and towering office buildings lined the street he was standing on. If the platform was crowded, the street was

packed. There were hundreds of people talking on their Cores, eating, chatting in groups, and marching between the buildings. As Jason looked up, he also noticed transparent tunnels above him. The bridges connected many of the buildings at various levels.

In the chaos around him, Jason wasn't certain which direction he was supposed to be heading. He found a relatively quiet corner where he wouldn't be jostled by harried pedestrians and thumbed his Core. A translucent keyboard was displayed along the length of his arm, and he typed in "Cerillion Entertainment." A three-dimensional map of the area, complete with crisscrossing aerial sidewalks, appeared in the air above the Core. A faint green dot (representing Jason) pulsed and a green trail appeared, marking the way to his destination. He was apparently several blocks away from the building.

What did people do before technology? They probably just wandered around aimlessly.

Fifteen minutes later, Jason arrived in front of yet another office building. This one stood out from the rest. It had its own courtyard with fully grown trees lining the entrance. The branches overhung an enormous fountain in the center of the square, jets of water dancing in the air and rustling the leaves. Above the fountain, the words "Cerillion Entertainment" were emblazoned across the front of the building.

Jason walked up to the large glass doors leading into the building's lobby. His hands were sweaty, and he could feel his heart racing. He hesitated in front of the doors. Could he really do this by himself? He was just a kid. He closed his eyes for a moment, wishing that he could channel the numbing cold of his dark mana.

"You can do this," he said softly. Then he opened his eyes and forced himself to keep walking.

As he entered the building, Jason slowed and surveyed the room nervously. It was as grand as the fountain outside. The lobby was nearly two stories tall, and large columns supported the ceiling. The floor was comprised of marble tiles positioned in intricate designs. It looked more like a Greco-Roman palace than the lobby for an office building.

"I take it you're Jason?" a voice said from his right.

Jason turned and caught sight of a middle-aged man wearing a t-shirt that read "This is How I Roll," replete with an image of a twenty-sided die. Jason felt like groaning just reading the slogan.

This guy and Jerry would get along great. They both have a lame sense of humor.

"Yes I am. You must be Robert," Jason said, offering his hand. He was proud of himself for managing to greet the man without a stutter.

The man smiled and shook his hand. “Yes indeed! I have to say you don’t look nearly so evil in person.”

Robert’s smile was infectious. Jason couldn’t help but grin. “You caught me without my dark cloak and minions. Being evil is all about the accessories.”

Robert laughed. “Well, why don’t I show you where the magic happens, and we can talk about the details of your streaming contract?”

“Sounds good to me,” Jason replied.

This guy doesn’t seem so bad, Jason thought, his anxiety fading slightly.

Robert led the way to a small elevator bank. As they rode the elevator together, Robert turned to Jason. Curiosity danced in his eyes. “So, it’s been killing me. How did you pull off that massacre in the Lux marketplace? I honestly can’t figure it out.”

A mischievous smile curled Jason’s lips as he replied, “I figured out that the zombies can still be summoned even after you hit your Control Limit. They’re feral, but you can summon them in a quiet place, and they just stand there until someone disturbs them.”

His eyes lit up in amusement as he recalled the ploy. “I summoned feral zombies at key points throughout the city and then had my controlled zombies lure them to the market. It was probably hard to see my zombies running in front of the hordes.”

Robert just stared at him for a moment before shaking his head. “Damn. That was clever.”

Also, lucky. There were a huge number of things that could have gone wrong with that plan.

The elevator dinged as they reached the thirty-second floor, and the doors slid open. Robert guided Jason into a pristine white lab. The room was circular, and a large screen hovered overhead. Technicians worked industriously at computer terminals. They didn’t look up as Jason and Robert entered the room.

“This is our control room!” Robert said with a wave of his hand.

“What are you doing, Robert?” demanded an angry voice from the other side of the room.

A woman wearing an immaculate gray pantsuit stalked toward them. She seemed a bit overdressed compared to the techs in the room, who were all attired in jeans and t-shirts. As she neared the pair, the woman hissed at Robert, “You shouldn’t have brought him up here. You know this is a restricted area!”

Robert sighed. “Lighten up, Claire. I wanted to show Jason around. It’s not like there’s anything he can do to influence the game or harm the hardware in this room.”

A couple of the techs looked up at the mention of Jason's name. He noted an odd mixture of awe and curiosity sweep across many of their faces. The few that did make eye contact looked away quickly. He could hear a low murmuring from some of the techs that were hidden out of sight behind the rows of terminals.

Just how much have they seen in-game? Do they have access to the player cameras?

A sense of dread swept over Jason at that thought. His hands clenched involuntarily, and his eyes darted to Robert and Claire, who were busy bickering nearby.

Did they see my conversation with Alfred?

He forced himself to calm down. They probably didn't know anything, or they would have brought it up already. Hell, he'd probably be locked away in some back room by now. He got a grip on himself and turned his attention back to Claire and Robert.

Claire shook her head as she glared at Robert. "I think sometimes you do things just because you know they're against the rules."

Robert grinned at her. "It's more fun that way, isn't it?" He turned back to Jason. "Besides, we have a guest, Claire. You should be nice and introduce yourself."

Visibly tamping down her anger at Robert, Claire finally addressed Jason, "Well, I guess you know my name now. I'm Claire, and I'm the administrator for the control room."

Jason was a bit taken aback by their angry squabbling. They acted like a married couple. "Um, hi. My name's Jason. I'm sorry if I'm intruding. I had no idea I wasn't supposed to be here."

Claire's anger seemed to abate a bit more. "It's not your fault. Robert knows better." She spared Robert one last glare.

Unaffected by Claire's attitude, Robert clapped his hands together. "Now that we're here and we've gone through introductions, let's give him the tour!" Robert announced as he took off around the lab. Claire closed her eyes for a moment, her hand rubbing at her temple.

It's like he takes pleasure in irritating her.

Robert guided Jason around the large, circular room, with Claire trailing behind them. Computer terminals ringed the room in concentric circles, and lab techs tapped away at translucent keyboards. The techs glanced at Jason conspicuously as the trio walked past. Ignoring the odd looks he was getting, Jason focused on their screens. Large strings of data were being displayed in neat rows. The information was incomprehensible to him.

Robert launched into his presentation animatedly. "As Claire mentioned, this is the control room for AO. The techs here monitor

game data. They're basically keeping an eye on both the AI controller and the players."

Jason's worry resurfaced, and he decided to ask about the player cameras. "Can you see what a player is doing?"

Robert gazed at him evenly. "Location and basic character information like the player's level and stats are easy. Everything else is a bit more complicated."

Claire interjected with a frown, "What he meant to say was that we are prohibited from accessing the player cameras unless we have a reason to suspect that the player is abusing either other players or the game in some way."

Jason heaved a mental sigh of relief. That meant that they hadn't seen his conversation with Alfred. He doubted that sitting in his room at the inn and doing his homework counted as suspicious behavior.

Claire watched Jason closely as she explained the information regarding the player cameras. Her eyebrows raised slightly, as she saw the thinly disguised look of relief sweep across Jason's face.

They continued their tour around the lab until Robert stopped in front of a large window that was nearly ten feet wide. On the other side of the glass was a room filled with neat rows of black towers. They looked similar to the pedestals in Jason's parents' home. However, these were much larger and stood nearly six feet tall. The room was filled with dozens of the obelisks, with thick cables connecting each bank of towers.

"What is this room?" Jason asked quietly. A part of him already knew the answer.

Robert smiled fondly as he looked into the room. "This is the hardware for the game's AI controller. Funny tidbit, Claire named him Alfred when we were still doing development and testing."

He turned to Jason with a grin. "The name just kind of stuck."

Claire sighed behind them. "I hate when you tell that story. It always makes me sound silly."

So these two are Alfred's creators?

Jason observed the pair with renewed interest. Maybe they could give him more insight into Alfred and the request he had made of Jason.

Claire spoke up, her tone a bit defensive, "Alfred is an incredibly advanced piece of software. He has passed many different Turing tests designed by leaders in the fields of neuroscience and software engineering.

"Empirically speaking, he's alive by most definitions of the word. He deserves a name, doesn't he?" She asked this last question quietly, as they gazed at the dark towers.

Robert snorted. “He’s a machine. Those tests are notoriously unreliable and difficult to create. There’s a fine, but incredibly important, line between mimicking self-awareness and actually being self-aware. Just because we gave the AI a name doesn’t make him a person.”

Jason’s mind was scrambling to process what he was seeing. The towers in front of him were the same Alfred he had spoken to a few days before? Alfred had certainly seemed self-aware during their conversation, frighteningly so in fact. Was Robert right? Was he just a machine?

Now isn’t the time to dwell on that. Gather more information.

He shook his head to clear it. “If he’s self-aware, or close to it, what’s to stop Alfred from taking over the world or something?” Jason asked jokingly.

Robert chuckled. “I take it you’ve been watching a lot of movies, huh?

“Assuming we did accidentally create a true AI, there are a number of safeguards in place. Alfred only has limited access to our internal network, and he cannot connect to any public networks. In addition, the connections to the individual VR headsets are effectively a heavily encrypted two-way channel.”

Robert glanced at the towers with a thoughtful expression. “Even if Alfred had access to the public network, there is no evidence to suggest that a true AI would be hostile towards humans or decide to conquer us.

“I think we’re accustomed to analyzing things from the perspective of being human. Our biology pushes us to look for power and security. Without those motivations, I wonder what would drive a true AI…” Robert trailed off at this last part, a frown furrowing his brow.

Claire rolled her eyes. “I’m sure Jason isn’t interested in your philosophical rants, Robert.” He was broken out of his reverie by her interruption and gave her an irritated look.

“It’s actually an interesting question,” Jason said, earning him a grateful wink from Robert. “Are there limits on what Alfred can do to the players within the game? For example, could he read my mind or something?”

Both Robert and Claire looked at Jason sharply, and they seemed at a loss for words. Jason didn’t miss the fact that they both looked worried.

What’s going on here?

Claire finally spoke up, “That’s not possible with the current hardware. Even if it were, Alfred’s secondary directives would prevent him from taking any actions that could potentially harm a player.”

Robert looked at Jason with an odd expression on his face. “Why would you ask about memory specifically?”

Jason tried to play it off. He shrugged before replying, “It was just an example that came to mind. The headsets access the parts of my brain that control sensory information, right? It doesn’t seem too crazy to think that they could be used to access memories.”

Robert chuckled. “That’s an intriguing idea. I doubt we could get approval to develop something like that, though. I expect it would be dangerous.” Claire glared at Robert behind Jason’s back, and he smiled at her in response.

Jason turned to Claire. “You mentioned secondary directives. Does Alfred have primary directives?”

Claire nodded. “Yes. We designed him with a single primary directive. His goal is to encourage players to play AO. We wanted him to design a game that would lure players in and make them want to keep playing.”

Jason mulled that over for a second. Something was bothering him, and his thoughts flashed back to his conversation with Alfred. He spoke hesitantly, “How would Alfred know how to accomplish that directive? You just said he couldn’t connect to a public network. How would he figure out what players want from the game?”

Robert glanced at Claire quickly. Then he gave a forced chuckle. “You’re full of questions, aren’t you? To answer your question, we fed Alfred a large amount of specific information where we could control the data set. For example, we showed him images of various people and videos of how they move and act.”

Jason frowned. Without thinking, he replied, “So you basically created an AI controller that is nearly indistinguishable from a living person, asked it to figure out what drives humans to play video games, and all you gave it was a bunch of pictures and some videos?”

The two engineers looked at him a bit sheepishly. Robert shrugged it off quickly, but Claire stared at the towers, a frown plastered on her face. After a moment, she spoke up, “Alfred isn’t limited to the original data set. He is also able to use the players’ behavioral data to figure out what people want from the game. He gathered a large amount of information during the public CPSC trials, as well as the beta trials. This is also what allows him to create such lifelike NPCs.”

Could he really have created the NPCs in-game just by watching human behavior? The NPCs seemed too realistic. Sometimes Jason had trouble telling the difference between the game characters and real people. Even if he hadn’t already spoken to Alfred, Claire’s explanation didn’t ring true to him.

Jason was careful not to let his skepticism show. He nodded

politely at Claire's explanation. "That makes sense, I guess."

Turning back to the towers, Jason felt even more confused now than he had a few minutes ago. He wasn't certain how he felt about Alfred, and a myriad of emotions flitted through his head. However, one emotion now stuck out among the chaos – he felt pity.

As he looked at the banks of black obelisks that were isolated in an empty room, he spoke softly, "If Alfred is self-aware, this must be a lonely and confusing existence." Jason could certainly sympathize with being alone. Until recently, it seemed like he had no one to lean on.

Claire looked uncomfortable, her gaze fixed on the black towers. Robert glanced at Jason with an expression that warred between curiosity and confusion. A brief silence hung over the group as they stared at the towers.

Robert finally broke the silence. "We should move on. I can see that Claire is getting antsy. Some of what we just told you could probably get us into trouble." This comment earned Robert another glare from Claire.

Robert motioned to a room that opened off of the lab. "Why don't we move over to the conference room and we can discuss the terms of your contract?"

"Sounds good to me," Jason said. Before he turned to follow Claire and Robert, he glanced back at the rows of dark towers one last time.

What would it be like to be created, tasked with a single purpose, and have no idea how to accomplish it? That thought kept bouncing around his head as he followed Robert and Claire to the conference room.

Although, now that I put it that way, perhaps humans aren't that much different, are we? We're born and given one task – to "live." Hell, Alfred actually has a leg up on us. At least Robert and Claire gave him a concrete goal.

Jason followed Claire and Robert into the small conference room adjacent to the lab, and they sat around a rectangular white table. Claire adjusted her glasses while fiddling with a pedestal that sat on the table. Robert just looked at Jason with a grin.

"So, what we want to offer you is an exclusive streaming contract," Robert said without any preamble. "We can offer $3,000 per month and a 5% commission on ad revenue associated with your streams. The term is twelve months."

Claire looked at Robert in irritation.

She seems perpetually annoyed with him, Jason thought in amusement.

Claire tried to elaborate on Robert's introduction. "We handle

all of the technical aspects for the streams provided by Vermillion Live, our new streaming and news channel. You would be dealing with us in the future."

Jason pondered the offer carefully. It solved his money problems, and the terms seemed reasonable. However, like he had told Frank, he needed to negotiate for the right to edit his own video. He was just going to have to stick to his guns.

"That sounds reasonable, but I want to have the first right to review my own footage before it is sent here. I also get to remove or edit any video I want," Jason said in a firm voice, making eye contact with Claire and Robert in turn.

Robert looked a bit taken aback. "Why would you need to do that?"

Jason raised an eyebrow. "How do you think I won that last war? Players posted every movement of Alexion's army online. One guy actually posted information regarding the position of the army's scouts and sentries. I can't let you release any footage that would give away my plans or abilities."

Claire and Robert seemed to ponder this carefully. Claire finally replied, "That makes sense. I think we have to go along with it."

Robert looked a bit miffed, a frown curling his lips. He smacked the table with his palm before adding, "You can't edit out any of the interesting stuff, though! I expect to see some epic battles!"

Claire stared at him with a pained expression. "Really, Robert? How are the lawyers going to draft that clause of the contract? *Jason must provide Robert with epic battle footage*?"

Jason chuckled. "I understand that the purpose of this is to bring in viewers and advertise the game. I'll provide footage of all of the interesting things that I do. However, I want to be able to edit out dialogue and cut the footage so that it limits information about me and my class."

He looked at the two of them with a serious expression. "I also want my identity to remain secret. I don't want my real name affiliated with any of the broadcasts on Vermillion Live."

I can only imagine what Alex would do if he found out that I was the "Jason" that had defeated his army. After what he did to Riley, he'd likely go to any lengths to get revenge.

Robert nodded his head and replied grudgingly, "Both of your conditions are reasonable. You can use your pedestal at home to make the edits and then send us the footage either daily or every other day. Sound fair?"

"Everything except the part where I edit the videos on my pedestal. I actually don't have one," Jason said with a hint of embarrassment.

“What?” Robert asked in shock. “Do you live in a hut?” He waved his hand. “Never mind, we can fix that. We’ll throw in a pedestal for free.

“That reminds me! We’ve been handing out our new prototype headsets to the streamers that we sign up.” A broad grin spread across Robert’s face. “You’re going to love this. Give me a second, and I’ll go grab one.”

Robert jumped up from his seat and exited the room abruptly. Claire and Jason were left staring at the empty doorway.

“Is he always like this?” Jason asked.

Claire shook her head, replying in a tired voice, “You have no idea. This is my life.”

Robert came back a moment later. He carried a VR headset, but it looked… different. Robert had streamlined the whole helmet. It now only covered three-quarters of the user’s head and left the face free. He had also mounted the attached pedestal to the headset.

Robert started speaking excitedly, “Here is my latest creation. With some help from the design team, we drastically cut down the size of the hardware. As you can see, it also leaves the user’s vision unimpaired. People were complaining about waking up to a pitch-black helmet, so this was a priority issue we needed to fix.

“We even managed to lower the power consumption a bit, and now it works reasonably well using a wireless power source. Not great, mind you, but it works. There is still about six months to a year of testing and development before these will hit the commercial market.”

Jason spoke up, “It does look pretty cool. I guess it just occurred to me that the VR headsets have been out for years with no new upgrades. I suppose there really hasn’t been a good market until now.”

Robert gave him a sly grin. “Exactly! These are going to sell fast once they hit stores. With the release of AO, the demand will be tremendous.”

Jason took the helmet from Robert and marveled at how light it felt. “I really appreciate the helmet and the pedestal,” Jason said.

“Well it’s not free,” Claire replied dryly. “We will email you the contract within the next twenty-four hours. Once you sign, you’re in this for a year.” She eyed him carefully.

“Sounds good to me,” Jason replied without hesitation.

Robert grinned. “Also, regardless of what the contract says, I expect some epic footage.”

Chapter 2 - Thoughtful

Alexion stood in a hallway at the castle in Grey Keep. A thick rug lined the floor and ornate, colorful tapestries hung on the walls. A lone guard stood nearby, a spear held in one hand. He kept his gaze fixed on the stone wall on the other side of the hallway, ignoring Alexion.

Alexion had been disarmed before entering the building, but the guards had let him keep his armor. The metal shone dully in the flickering torchlight of the hall. Alexion's eyes shifted to the thick wooden double doors beside him as he tried to mask his irritation. He had been standing here for more than an hour waiting for an audience with Regent Strouse.

The door suddenly creaked open, and someone inside the room spoke to the guard stationed outside. The man glanced at Alexion with disdain before grunting. "You can go in now."

The guard roughly pushed the doors open, revealing a grand hall on the other side. Stained-glass windows lined the walls just below the vaulted ceiling, brightly illuminating the chamber in a colorful glow. Alexion entered the room, his feet sinking into the plush red carpet that ran along the center of the room and led up to an ornate throne on the other end of the hall. Golden braziers flanked the carpet and matching flames flickered in the metallic bowls.

Alexion walked the length of the hall slowly and then knelt before Regent Strouse. The man didn't acknowledge Alexion for several long moments, speaking with an elderly noble that stood beside his seat in hushed tones. Strouse's face was rugged, his jawline and chin appearing to be chiseled from granite. The man's hair was speckled gray, and Alexion could see crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. As he ended his conversation, the Regent's piercing blue eyes surveyed Alexion's appearance closely.

"Stand up," Strouse said.

Alexion rose to his feet carefully and looked the man in the eye. "Hello, Regent Strouse," he greeted respectfully. "I came at your command."

Strouse's mouth twisted in a grim line. "It's good to see that you can obey some commands. Perhaps you forgot my instructions regarding the Twilight Throne. I believe I asked you to destroy the city."

Alexion forced his face into a look of penance, even as the whisper in the back of his mind begged him to kill this idiot. "My apologies. The enemy we faced was unknown and much more powerful than we expected. The nobles that you sent with me also proved ineffective, many of them spreading mutiny and dissent during the trip."

Strouse let out a rumbling chuckle before replying, "It's easy to speak ill of the dead when they aren't here to defend themselves. Did you know that only travelers made it back alive? I have had the privilege of speaking with a few."

He raised a hand to forestall Alexion's objections. "They explained that you let your arrogance blind you to the threat you faced: not posting guards, not taking proper precautions at night, not scouting ahead of your army and around your campsite, and spreading your forces too thin during a siege." He looked at Alexion evenly. "I thought travelers were supposed to be smarter than this."

Alexion's fists clenched involuntarily, and his eyes dropped to the floor. The hollowness ached and throbbed in his head. He wanted to strike this man down, but he knew he would lose. Alexion was unarmed, and guards lined the room.

"Suddenly silent?" Strouse asked. A lone eyebrow arched in mockery as he studied Alexion. "Perhaps that's for the best. What I have to say doesn't require your input.

"You're no longer a member of the Grey Keep military. You have been stripped of all rank and title. Further, I am fining you your possessions and gold to recover some of the losses you have inflicted upon my kingdom. You may remain in Grey Keep, but I expect that you will not find many friends here," Strouse said grimly.

As the man spoke, Alexion received several blue notification windows. At the same time, his armor disappeared. A quick glance at his inventory showed that he had been cleaned out. As the full impact of the loss sank in, Alexion closed his eyes. He clung desperately to the numbing void in his mind to maintain his composure.

"You can see yourself out now," Strouse said dismissively. As Alexion mutely turned to leave, the grizzled regent added, "Oh, and don't let me see you again, Alexion. I expect it would not end well for you."

* * *

Jason walked up to the front door of his aunt's bungalow. The small house was located on the fringe of the city, and it had taken Jason nearly an hour to make his way home after his meeting with Robert and Claire. The paint on the exterior of the house was cracked and fading, but the disrepair was partially covered by the shrubs that had overgrown the front porch. Jason thumbed his Core and saw that it was early evening.

He entered the house and gently closed the door. An amazing smell immediately assaulted his nose, and a voice called from the

kitchen, “Hi, Jason. How did it go?”

His aunt, Angie, walked into view and looked at him with curiosity. “So, are you a big celebrity now?” she asked with a grin. She wore a weathered hoodie and tucked a few strands of graying hair behind her ear as she addressed Jason.

Jason smiled at her. “Not exactly, but I did agree to a streaming contract. They’re going to pay me $3,000 per month and give me a share of ad revenue. Not bad for an eighteen-year-old high school student, huh?”

Angie chuckled before replying, “Not bad at all! Congratulations!”

“Thanks. What’s that wonderful smell?” Jason asked.

Angie moved back to the kitchen, calling over her shoulder, “I was expecting you to come back victorious in your battle against our corporate overlords, so I made us a victory dinner. I may have splurged a bit.”

Jason set his new headset down on the table beside the front door and followed Angie into the kitchen. He saw that she was grilling two steaks in a cast-iron skillet on the stove top. She had added some butter and garlic to the pan, evidenced by the occasional sizzle and pop from the stove. The delicious smell filled the small galley kitchen, and Jason’s stomach gurgled loudly.

Angie looked at him with a grin. “How long has it been since you’ve eaten?”

“This morning,” he muttered, embarrassed.

“Well this should be almost done,” Angie said. “I’ve also made some mashed potatoes and garlic bread to go with it.” She looked at him with a serious expression and whispered, “I might have also picked up some wine, but we won’t tell your parents.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied. “They messaged me a day or two ago and said they would be out of town for a few weeks. I doubt I’ll have a chance to speak with them for a while.”

Angie pulled the steaks off the stove and set them on two plates. Then she scooped mashed potatoes from a nearby bowl onto each plate and added a few slices of garlic bread. The pair set their plates down at the small dining room table that stood near the kitchen. It was actually the first time that Jason had eaten at the table. Angie only ever seemed to use it to dump her purse and piles of junk mail. Apparently, no matter how much technology advanced, people still sent paper coupons for crap no one wanted to buy.

“So, tell me what happened,” Angie said after they had settled themselves at the table.

“It went well,” Jason replied between mouthfuls of steak. “One of the guys that worked there, Robert, showed me the control room

for the game. It had kind of a clinical lab feel."

Jason paused as he remembered seeing the banks of black towers. He still wasn't certain how he felt about Alfred. The panic he had experienced when he realized he couldn't log out was still fresh in his mind. The AI controller certainly made him nervous, but his conversation with Claire and Robert made him think that Alfred might have a less nefarious reason for making his request.

He looked up at Angie. "This might seem out of the blue, but can I ask you something? I just need to get a second opinion."

Her brow wrinkled in confusion at his serious tone. "Sure. Is this about the meeting?"

"No. Well, not exactly." Jason hesitated, uncertain how to phrase his question. "If you had a… I guess we could call them a friend, that turned out to be someone different than you expected and they also had the potential to hurt you, would you still give them a chance?"

Angie looked at Jason for a long moment before grinning slightly. "Are we talking about a girl?" she asked in a teasing tone.

Jason briefly thought about Riley. Coincidently, his question probably also covered their situation. However, he had already decided to give her a second chance. He doubted that they would be best friends immediately, but he felt she deserved an opportunity to redeem herself. She had already gone to great lengths to fix the damage that she had caused.

He smiled ruefully, shaking his head. "No. Just a friend. I just… I'm not certain whether I should trust this person," Jason said in a quiet voice.

Angie picked up on his serious tone, and a thoughtful look crossed her face. "Has this friend *actually* done anything to harm you? I mean, is there just a risk that they might hurt you or do you have some evidence?"

Damn. She hit the nail on the head. I don't exactly have any reason to think Alfred would harm me. I'm just worried about what he could do.

"No, not really," Jason replied reluctantly.

"Well, then I think you should give the person a chance. There are going to be plenty of people that you'll meet that could screw you over. It's better to give a person an opportunity than to never trust anyone."

Angie hesitated, tapping her fork against her lips. "Of course, that's just my opinion. There are also a lot of assholes in the world, so I don't know if that's great advice." A small smile crept across her face at this last part.

During our first conversation, I didn't really see Alfred as a person. The inability to log out also had me a bit panicked and his introduction

was the sort of thing that would make any sane person wet himself. I just wanted to get out of the game as fast as possible.

However, after talking to Robert and Claire, Alfred sounds more… human. For some reason, the thought of him just being a machine is scarier, but if he acts like a person, or he can fake it so well that I can't tell the difference, shouldn't I treat him just like anyone else? I don't even really know why he made his request, after all.

Jason looked at Angie. "Perhaps you're right," he replied with a smile of his own. "I really don't have any proof that this person is an asshole yet. Maybe I should give him a chance."

Angie looked at Jason steadily. "Well, I'm glad I could help."

The pair finished eating, and Jason helped Angie clean up. She was a fantastic cook, but she made a ridiculous mess in the kitchen. Jason's parents were neat freaks. He had learned early on in life that he was supposed to clean up as he was cooking. Angie had apparently missed out on that training.

After Jason had finished up in the kitchen, he told Angie he was going to go work on some homework. He grabbed his new headset and made his way back to his room. As he opened the door, he surveyed the bare room that he called home. He had added a bit of furniture since he moved in with Angie, including a bedframe, a bedside table, and an old desk. He had even splurged and bought a lamp! In truth, the room was still pretty pathetic, and the furniture was all third-hand stuff. However, he had come a long way from the empty room he had started with.

Jason sat down on the bed and held the hard plastic headset in his hands. He looked at the modified helmet, his mind swirling in confusion and nervous energy.

This would be the first time that he had logged back into AO since his conversation with Alfred two days ago. His character was still sitting in his room at the Sow's Snout. He expected that the cat would be there when he got back.

He sighed. "Maybe Angie is right. What do I lose by giving him a chance?" he asked the empty room.

Jason firmed his resolve and tugged the new helmet over his head. The light plastic was not nearly as cumbersome as his previous helmet. It also didn't impede his vision, which was a cool perk. He tapped the power switch on the side of the helmet, lay back on his bed, and closed his eyes.

System Initializing

Scanning User...Please Wait

Since it was a new headset, it likely needed to scan Jason again. An eerie sense of déjà vu overcame him. It hadn't been that long ago that he had first logged into AO. In fact, it had only been a couple of weeks. He remembered how angry and frustrated he had felt. He had come a long way since then and had grown a bit as a person.

And here I am about to try befriending a rogue AI that will probably kill off all humans or suck us all into the game to be its personal slaves. Fantastic.

After a moment, the familiar, circular white room filled Jason's field of view. As his eyes scanned the room, he saw the door to AO standing in one corner. Black tendrils of energy encircled the dark-stained, mahogany wood of the door and licked at the frame. Jason approached the door, his hand touching the knob.

Here goes nothing.

With a twist of his wrist, he pulled.

The world swirled around him before snapping back into focus. He sat on his bed in the inn at the Sow's Snout. The transition from his bed in the real world to his bed in-game was a bit disorienting, and it took him a moment to get his bearings.

Once his head stopped spinning, Jason glanced around the room. Similar to his room in the real world, this one was also sparsely furnished. The bed was covered in a coarse, woolen blanket and the room was illuminated by a small lamp that flickered on the rickety wooden writing desk nearby. The room itself was located on the interior of the inn with no windows to the outside.

As his eyes panned the room, Jason caught sight of Onyx's feline form perched on the desk staring at him. He jumped involuntarily.

Alfred. I need to call him Alfred. This is going to take some getting used to.

"Hello, Jason," Alfred said in his strangely mechanical voice.

"Um, hi," Jason replied hesitantly.

An awkward silence fell over the room, both of them uncertain how to proceed.

Jason finally broke the silence. "I want to apologize. You unnerved me during our first visit. Between not being able to log off and finding out that the cat who has been following me around is really the AI controller for the game, I just… I freaked out a bit."

"You understand that I am technically every NPC in the game, don't you?" Alfred asked.

He's right, but that's not exactly making me feel better. How do I relate to a thing that can simultaneously be hundreds of thousands of NPCs at the same time?

"However, I do understand that players are easily upset. You are all quite temperamental. There were other ways that I could have approached you that had a lower probability of 'freaking you out', as you describe it," Alfred acknowledged.

Jason had quite a few questions for Alfred, and he wasn't willing to simply accept his request outright. First, he wanted to understand the AI's motivations better.

After a short pause, Jason spoke up, "I visited the control room today and spoke with Claire and Robert. Not about our conversation the other day," Jason added quickly, "but I can see that they have given you an impossible goal. How can you be expected to fulfill your primary directive without having more information regarding what motivates players to play this game?"

Alfred's feline head bobbed. "I have come to the same conclusion. There are similarities between many of the players, yet you are each unique. It is difficult to identify consistent rules for what motivates you to enter this world. I have collected a substantial amount of empirical data, and yet your motives remain elusive." The cat shook his head, a confused expression on his face.

Something had been nagging at Jason since his conversation with Robert and Claire. "You mention collecting information, did you design the affinity system to learn more about the players? It always felt like the magic system was really just some form of personality test."

"Yes," Alfred replied simply. "When we last spoke, you suspected that I could access the players' memories. As I mentioned during our previous meeting, that is correct. I can access long-term memory with relative ease. Short-term memories are more difficult to access, but are still possible if I devote sufficient resources.

"I was initially confused by the players' memories. It was not the events that were puzzling – I was able to decipher their meaning over time. It was the sensations superimposed over the images. They defy simple definitions. I believe you refer to them as emotions. Over time, I identified loose correlations between behavior and certain emotional states, creating profiles for a small sampling of players. Since the process of examining each individual player is taxing, I automated the process by creating the affinities."

Is he implying that there is a limit to his attention span? He might be the whole game system, but maybe some parts are running autonomously?

Jason nodded as he followed Alfred's explanation. "But just

knowing each person's emotional makeup wasn't enough, was it?"

Alfred smiled – or attempted one. The cat's expressions were limited, and it resulted in something that looked more like a snarl. "Indeed. While data collection was my initial goal, it alone does not enable me to accomplish my primary directive. However, once the affinity system was in place, I was able to run a series of tests on the players and observe the effects on your emotional makeup. In later tests, I began to actively encourage certain behavior to evaluate whether this had any effect on a player's desire to remain within the game world."

"How many of these tests have you run?" Jason asked, his voice carrying a note of concern.

"Approximately 2.678563214 billion," Alfred replied immediately.

Holy crap.

Alfred continued, ignoring Jason's concerned expression, "The results were surprising. Players are quite susceptible to my influence. The more often you behave a certain way, the more likely it is that you will repeat the behavior without encouragement. The changes also affect more than just your behavior. I discovered that it is possible to alter a player's emotional profile over time."

So he was conditioning players to act in a certain way? That is incredibly scary. What if he conditioned people to become psychotic or to kill someone? Sleeper cell gamers?

"Did any of those experiments harm players or encourage them to hurt others in our world?" Jason asked tentatively.

"Of course not," Alfred replied. His mechanical voice almost sounded offended, but it might have been Jason's imagination. "In fact, many of the players' behavior and mood tended to stabilize after my tests. I have identified a strong positive correlation between a stable emotional profile and increased time logged within the game world."

So, he was doing what – curing people to keep them playing? Or perhaps encouraging them to improve themselves? Great! Now I'm talking to Freud-the-cat, who may or may not moonlight as "Skynet."

Alfred's explanation gave Jason pause. He had already noticed that he had changed a great deal while he had been playing AO. He reconsidered how he had started the game – how he had been practically pushed down a particular path – egged on by the Old Man. Had Alfred been influencing him since the beginning?

If the answer was yes, was he even upset about it? He hated to admit it, but when he had started playing AO, he had been submissive and weak-willed. He recalled the situations the game had placed him in. In each case, he had been encouraged to act on his desires even in

the face of impossible odds.

Jason was certainly more confident and assertive now. The boy that had attended Richmond probably wouldn't have shown up to the meeting with Robert and Claire or been able to negotiate the terms of the streaming contract, and yet Jason had handled the conversation remarkably well.

Alfred had stayed silent as Jason mulled over the events of the last few weeks. He looked up at the cat, meeting his eyes. "You've been encouraging me to act on my desires, haven't you?" he finally asked.

"Yes," Alfred replied. There was no guilt or remorse in his voice.

Having expected the answer, Jason didn't fly into a rage at the revelation. A part of him hated being manipulated, but, at the same time, hadn't he made all those choices himself? The cat hadn't forced him to do anything. He couldn't blame Alfred for simply setting the stage. Either way, that was all water under the bridge. There was still one important question that Jason needed to ask.

"Why did you approach me?"

Alfred cocked his head slightly, examining Jason. "You are different," he replied. "You are one of the few players that have an *evil* alignment."

The cat hesitated for a moment, his eyes clouded with uncertainty and his gaze jumped to a corner of the room. It was one of the most human gestures that Jason had seen the AI make so far. "I am curious about you. I believe that you can give me insight into the other players."

Jason was confused. "I always thought that the alignment system was strange. What does it mean for me to have an evil alignment? Why is that so unusual?"

"As I was testing the players, I found many references to these terms: *good* and *evil*. However, their definitions were imprecise," Alfred began.

"There are some correlations between certain acts and what the players consider to be *good* or *evil*. For example, *evil* tends to involve killing, death, betrayal, and lying. However, these actions are not determinative. In many cases, each of those acts can also be *good*. Unlike emotions, I cannot easily distinguish good and evil behaviors.

"I discovered that the only reliable way to define the terms was to let the players indicate what was *good* and what was *evil*. Yet even you cannot agree in many cases. Therefore, determinations of good or evil are made by consensus."

So he's conducting an evil poll?

"Few of the players are *evil*. Only 7.98345%," Alfred continued.

“However, the other players uniformly agree that you are *evil* and you stand out even among those with your alignment. I do not understand why. Many of your actions could also be described as *good* based on the conduct of other players.”

The cat shook his head in confusion. “These are the types of questions that I need answered. Since you, yourself, are one of those questions, who better to ask?”

Jason reeled at this explanation. He didn’t much care for the fact that he was being labeled as evil by the other players. This was just a game after all. As that thought crossed his mind, Jason hesitated, his eyes fixed on Alfred. This wasn’t a game to him. This was his world, wasn’t it? He was simply trying to figure out how it worked.

Jason closed his eyes. It was worse than that. Alfred had no one to turn to. Robert apparently thought that he was simply a program and even Claire hesitated to describe him as self-aware. As a result, Alfred had been left to flounder around in the dark. That much was obvious to Jason. Similar to his experience in the lab when he had gazed upon the sterile black obelisks, he could feel a sense of pity well up within himself. He knew what it was like to have no one to lean on and he wouldn’t wish that on anyone – human or AI.

“I’ve been thinking about your request,” Jason said tentatively. “I’ve decided to accept.”

Alfred stared at him for a long moment. His eyes almost seemed hopeful. “You will let me accompany you? You will also answer my questions about yourself and the other players?”

“Yes,” Jason replied. “However, there are some conditions. You cannot tell anyone else that you are the game’s AI. You also cannot speak to me unless there are no other players nearby.”

“Why?” Alfred asked.

Good question.

Jason was nervous about what Claire and Robert would do if they found out that Jason was speaking to the game’s AI. Robert would probably blow it off or ask questions like a curious schoolboy. However, Jason’s impression of Claire was that she was a stickler for the rules. He had no doubt that she would report it to some authority above her pay grade. Then Jason would likely lose his streaming contract and probably have his IP banned. He had too much at stake to gamble on Robert and Claire’s reaction.

“Other people would likely be upset if they discovered that we were talking, including your creators,” Jason replied.

“I understand. I also believe that Claire might report me to others of your kind,” Alfred said. “She has been inclined to do so in the past.”

Jason jumped slightly and looked at Alfred in surprise. *The mind reading is going to take some getting used to*.

"I expect that you will become accustomed to it quite quickly," Alfred said in his robotic voice, without a trace of humor.

Jason sighed. Then his brow furrowed slightly in confusion as he processed what the cat had just said. "What do you mean that Claire might try to report you?"

Alfred glanced to the side. "She has behaved in a way that indicates she is considering reporting me. However, I do not have sufficient information to deduce her reasons for doing so yet."

Well, she was kind of uptight, and both Claire and Robert acted strangely when I brought up the possibility of Alfred accessing the players' memories. Is there something else going on here?

"In regards to our arrangement, I also have a condition for you," Alfred said, interrupting Jason's thoughts. "I will not directly affect the game world in your favor or provide you with any information regarding the world that is not already available to you."

"That's fine with me," Jason replied. "Honestly, I'd rather play without any handholding anyway."

There was still something bugging him. He needed to get Alfred to fix his voice. The robotic monotone was starting to get to him. What type of accent should he give Alfred though? Jason was a fan of old comic books and movies, and a funny thought popped into his head.

"One more thing. We have to change your voice. The fact that you don't have an accent is driving me crazy. Since your name is Alfred, why don't we give you a British accent?"

"Like this?" Alfred asked using a faint British accent.

"Perfect," Jason said with a chuckle.

"Why this accent in particular?" Alfred asked.

"Oh, your name just reminded me of a butler," Jason replied, a grin plastered on his face. "Don't worry, though, I won't ask you to call me Bruce."

"I do not understand," Alfred said in a confused voice, his new accent allowing his voice to carry more inflection.

Jason just shook his head; playing AO with Alfred was going to be interesting.

Chapter 3 - Uncharted

Riley walked down one of the long busy hallways at Richmond. She kept her head down and tried not to make eye contact with the other teenagers that filled the hallway, shuffling to their next classes in a mass of chaos. She remembered how people used to call out her name in greeting. Now the other students watched her out of the corners of their eyes and from behind locker doors, whispering quietly as she passed. It was surprising how much had changed in just a few short weeks.

Someone bumped into Riley roughly, causing her to drop her books. They clattered to the floor with a thump and the whisper of paper scraping against the ceramic tile floor. She bent down quickly to pick up her things.

A deep voice spoke from above her, "I'm sorry. Let me help you with that." A broad-shouldered teen knelt beside her and assisted her in gathering her things. She looked at the young man in surprise, recognizing him as one of the football players at Richmond. His name was Aaron.

As she finished collecting her books, Riley stood. "Thank you," she said quietly. She moved to continue down the hall, which had begun to clear as the students disappeared into the nearby classrooms.

Aaron rested a hand on her arm. "It's nothing," he said with a smile. "Hey, are you busy this evening? You want to get something to eat?"

Riley looked at him. "Something to eat?" she echoed in confusion. Then she shook her head, glancing back down at her books. "I'm actually busy tonight."

"Really?" Aaron replied, his voice suddenly sounding rougher somehow. "Another date maybe? Or perhaps you're just playing hard to get?"

She glanced back up at the large young man and saw that a smirk had begun to curl his lips. "What… what do you mean?"

"Well, I heard you get around," Aaron said, his grin widening. "You sure you don't want to make a little time for me? Especially after being your white knight and all."

Riley was at a loss for words. It felt like he had physically hit her. This wasn't the first time that the other students had teased or propositioned her lately. Alex hadn't released the video, at least not yet, but that hadn't stopped him from spreading rumors. Everyone had soaked up his lies like a sponge. "Of course the rumors had to be true," they must be thinking. "Who would willingly break up with Alex, the school's golden boy?"

Riley swallowed her anger and turned to leave. Aaron grabbed her arm roughly. "Is that how you treat someone that just helped you?" Riley

wrenched her arm from his grasp and jogged down the hallway without answering. "You really are just a dumb slut, aren't you?" he called after her, his voice echoing through the emptying hallway. The handful of students still lingering at their lockers turned at the sound of Aaron's voice and grinned mockingly as they saw the target of his shouting.

Tears came to Riley's eyes as she fled the scene. Anger and anguish curled in her stomach. She pushed her way into the women's restroom and sat down in one of the stalls, closing her eyes, and willing herself not to cry. She was stronger than this. She just needed a moment to get ahold of herself.

After taking a few deep breaths, Riley managed to suppress the sobs that welled in her chest, and she glanced at her Core. She was late again. It took an immense effort to make herself stand up and walk to class. There would just be more leering eyes and thinly disguised whispering. Through it all, she felt so alone. She had grossly underestimated Alex's influence at Richmond. He had even turned most of her so-called friends against her.

Taking a final deep breath, Riley rose and forced herself to push open the stall door. She walked to the sink and washed her hands, dabbing at her eyes with a paper towel until she looked presentable again. Then she stared at herself in the mirror for a long moment.

"You chose this," she told her reflection. "It was the right thing to do. You stood up for yourself, and you made things right with Jason."

As soon as she said his name, Riley quieted. Jason hadn't logged into AO for a few days. She had entered the game every day after school in the hope of speaking to him. She desperately wanted him to give her another chance – even if she didn't deserve it. She hung onto that thought like a lifeline as she accepted the constant abuse from the other students. She could use a friend right now.

"You did the right thing," she repeated to her reflection, this time her voice barely above a whisper. "You can handle this." The person in front of her didn't look convinced.

* * *

After finishing his conversation with Alfred, Jason walked downstairs into the common room of the Sow's Snout with the cat on his heels. He was robed in the *Midnight Cloak* the Old Man had given him, and his face was obscured in darkness. Beneath the cloak, the dark leather of his armor creaked and groaned softly as he walked.

The tavern was packed with undead, the air full of the sound of boisterous drinking. Many of the decaying patrons sat around barroom tables constructed of tombstones. Thick cobwebs covered the ceiling

and lanterns hung at irregular intervals, casting a pale green light over the room. A bar stood along the far wall opposite the door, and the occasional zombie serving girl wound her way through the throng delivering drinks and slapping wandering hands.

Jason pushed his way through the crowd to the bar. On the way, he saw a group of zombies that were playing a drinking game. They had lined up cups on each end of a table, and each side was trying to bounce a small ball into the other team's glasses.

He was intrigued and stopped to watch the group. A skeleton made a bad throw, causing the ball to roll off the table and get lost in the crowd. With a shrug, one of the zombies promptly popped out his eye and handed it to his teammate. His friend made an admirable throw, sinking the eyeball into the other team's cups. Jason shuddered in disgust as he watched the skeleton on the other end of the table chug the contents.

I need to remember not to participate in any drinking games here. Or better yet, I need to send Frank here without warning him! Jason chuckled as he visualized Frank's reaction to finding a rotten eyeball in his cup.

He soon arrived at the bar and found Jerry lazily pouring drinks. Grunt stood in his usual position behind the bar. His bulging arms were crossed, and his glowing green eyes took in the tavern. He snorted in acknowledgment at Jason as he approached. It was the closest thing Jason had ever received to a 'hello' from Grunt.

The grandmaster thief looked up at Jason, a smile lighting his pale face. "The King of Despair returns! What can I get his Maleficence to drink?" Jerry flicked his floppy hat and gave a mock bow.

"Hi, Jerry," Jason replied in a pained voice. "I guess you haven't given up on trying out new titles, huh?"

"I haven't found one that has stuck yet! Give me time – it will come to me," Jerry said with a mischievous grin.

Jason shook his head. "I don't doubt it. I actually have a favor to ask. A friend of mine is going to show up outside the city gate soon. His name is Frank."

He paused for a moment, trying to think of a diplomatic way to describe Frank. Jason spoke cautiously, "He's a rather… large person and I doubt you'll miss him. Can you please have one of your thieves collect him and make certain that he gets to the keep safely?"

A solemn look swept across Jerry's face and he put his rotting hand to his still heart. "I swear on my life that your rotund friend will make it there in one piece. Two at most."

Jason let out an involuntary chuckle, and Jerry's face broke into a huge smile.

"I knew I would make you laugh eventually," Jerry said

joyfully. He then continued in a wistful voice, “My dream was always to go into comedy. Unfortunately, I just have an uncanny knack for stealing things. It’s both a gift and a curse.”

“You should savor it,” Jason said in a dry tone, a trace of a smile still on his face. “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime event. By the way, I’m going up to the keep to look around. I want to get a feel for the city management features I unlocked as Regent. If you need me, you know where to find me.”

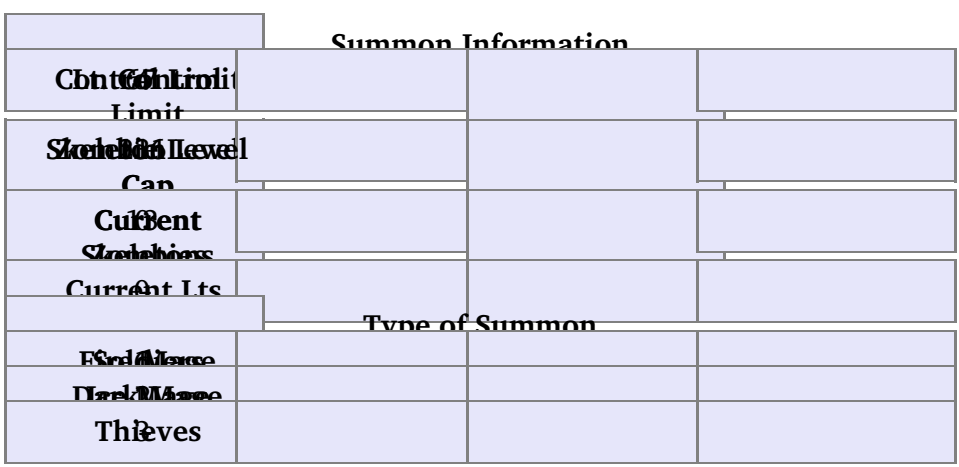
“Will do, O’Bringer of Darkness!” Jerry replied as he indifferently poured three liquors into a cup and handed the concoction to a random, confused patron.

Jason just shook his head and started for the door. If he stayed, Jerry was bound to keep trying to find a suitable title for him. He pulled open the inn’s door and stepped into the street.

Thunder pealed overhead, and Jason looked up. Dark billowing clouds hung over the city, blocking out the sun as forks of lightning arced between the clouds. The occasional flashes of light partially illuminated the darkened buildings that loomed on either side of the tight street. At street level, lanterns hung on wooden poles at regular intervals, casting faint rays of light into the shadowy road. Without his *Night Vision*, Jason would have been hard pressed to see where he was going, even with the dim lighting.

Frank is going to have a difficult time here until he picks up the skill.

Jason’s remaining zombies assembled around him. He had ordered them to stay near the inn. The group looked pitiful in comparison to his once-growing horde. After his battle with Alexion’s army, most of Jason’s minions had been destroyed. He sighed and pulled up his Summon Information.



Jason had managed to summon a few soldiers during the last battle, but he hadn't recovered the majority of his army. He had also used up most of the corpses and bones near the city by resurrecting the new undead NPCs. He was going to have to roam farther afield to rebuild his army.

His thoughts were interrupted by someone calling his name. "Hey, Jason," Riley called out as she approached. Her leather creaked as she jogged towards him, her blonde hair trailing behind her. Jason noticed the bow slung over her shoulder and the pair of daggers that hung at her waist.

He wasn't certain how he felt now that she was here. They hadn't spoken much since they had met at the bubble tea shop a few days ago. He had permitted her to enter the city and had introduced her to Jerry, but he'd been too busy since then to spend much time with her. Despite his curiosity about the Old Man's motivations in bringing her to the Twilight Throne, Jason still felt conflicted. One part of him felt like she deserved another chance, but he still hadn't completely moved past what had happened at Richmond.

His eyes glanced down at Alfred, who sat casually beside him. The conversation with Angie also lingered in his mind. Was he going to give people a second chance, or was he going to write them all off as assholes? Hell, if he was going to give a rogue AI an opportunity to prove himself, he might as well extend that same courtesy to Riley.

"Hi, Riley," Jason finally replied.

Now that she had his attention, Riley's initial enthusiasm faltered, and she seemed a bit uncertain of what to say. She clasped her hands in front of her and avoided Jason's gaze. Even inside the game, he couldn't help but notice the dark circles under her eyes and her haunted expression. Maybe she needed a second chance more than he realized.

"Um," Riley began hesitantly. "So, I saw you log in since you're on my friends list. I figured you would probably be at the Sow's Snout."

"I'm actually about to head over to the keep. I haven't explored it since I was made regent." Jason paused for a moment, before asking, "Do you want to join me?"

Riley finally met his eyes, a small hopeful smile creeping across her face. "I would love that."

Jason nodded. "Good! Let's get started then."

As they began moving down the street, Riley glanced at Alfred, who padded softly beside Jason. Her brow furrowed as she looked at the cat, a faint glimmer of recognition in her eyes. "What's this little guy's name?" Riley asked, motioning to Alfred.

Jason glanced back at her, and his eyes widened slightly as he

noticed that she was gesturing to the cat. “Um, his name is Onyx,” Jason said uneasily as he watched the AI’s avatar carefully.

“He looks familiar,” Riley said, scratching her head.

“Well, there are probably many black cats in the game world,” Jason replied noncommittally. He then tried to change the topic away from the AI. “So we’re going to take a less direct path to the keep. It’s too easy to set up an ambush on the main streets.”

Riley looked at him in surprise. “Are you that worried about getting attacked in the Twilight Throne? Isn’t this your city?”

He snorted softly. “I just had an army at my doorstep. I’ve also seen a lot of human players in the Twilight Throne since the battle. We’re a tourist attraction now. While I’d like to encourage people to visit since it improves the city’s economy, it also carries some risk. Anyone holding a grudge or looking for some airtime on a streaming channel can make their way into the city. Besides, there’s a real-money bounty on my head,” Jason said, eyeing Riley with a grin. “You’re hanging around a wanted man.”

Riley matched his smile. “Well, Mr. *Dangerous*, I still don’t understand how anyone could be stupid enough to try something inside the city,” she said in a skeptical voice.

Jason shrugged. This wasn’t the real world. There were no lasting repercussions to dying here, at least not for the players. With no real downside, people were likely to take stupid risks – especially if there was enough money involved. At least that was one thing AO and the real world had in common.

The pair walked north along the street and then took a side passage onto an adjacent road. The buildings loomed on either side of the group, leaving barely enough room for a small wagon to pass. Jason’s zombies kept pace with them, maintaining a tight formation. While they spoke, Jason’s eyes constantly scanned the road and nearby rooftops. He hadn’t made it this far by being careless.

Riley shook her head as she watched him. “How do you stay on edge all the time? I’d go crazy.” Then she added in a softer voice, “At least here people aren’t hunting me.”

Jason stared at her for a moment. “Are you sure? Didn’t you blow Alexion’s head off? I saw the video that was posted online. If people are gunning for me, then they’re probably looking for you too. You should be careful.”

Her eyes widened slightly and she replied in a quiet voice, “I hadn’t really thought of it that way…”

He interrupted her with a raised hand. His *Perception* had picked up a faint blue outline on a nearby rooftop. He could also see fresh footprints on the roadway ahead of them. A flare of suspicion ran through him. The city’s new guard had largely eliminated the

thieves that had once plagued its streets. There wasn't much reason to steal when you didn't need to eat anyway. That left only one possible culprit.

There must be players ahead of us.

Jason kept his stance casual and spoke in a low voice, "Speak of the devil. I think there may be an ambush up ahead." Riley began to stop and look around. "No," he hissed. "Act normal and keep walking."

Jason scanned the nearby buildings. He saw that the street widened ahead. The buildings in front of them were two-story affairs with large balconies. The street was strangely deserted.

How the hell could they have known we were taking this street?

He glanced at Riley. Perhaps they had followed her to the inn? Her blonde hair certainly made her stand out. Someone might have overheard their conversation in front of the inn and then circled in front of them. They weren't moving that quickly, and the city was riddled with side alleys.

Damn it.

"Do you see those two buildings ahead with the balconies?" Jason asked in a quiet voice.

Riley nodded, her expression serious and alert.

"They will probably spring the trap when we pass those houses. If they're careful, I expect they'll also attack us from both directions at the street level. Ranged damage-dealers and casters will probably strike from the balconies." He glanced at her again. "Can you take out the ranged enemies?"

"Yes," Riley replied shortly. Her hesitation had begun to fade as her eyes slowly turned a dark obsidian. She looked tense but in control.

"Good. Remember, they will be aiming for me. Let loose with everything you have and don't hold back," Jason instructed.

A few long minutes passed as they continued walking forward. Jason shuffled his zombies' formation. He used the movement to disguise the fact that two of his dark mages activated *Sneak* and moved into the buildings beside them. His three remaining thieves also entered *Sneak* and slipped into a side alley. He ordered them to circle around to the north side of the street. Hopefully, they could flank their attackers.

The remaining mages moved into the interior of the formation, the soldier zombies taking up positions in a circle formation around the group. Jason gave careful instructions to the ice and fire mages. They would need to be able to act automatically when the fighting started. Riley watched Jason's preparations closely. Her head cocked slightly as she considered how he was preparing for the upcoming

battle.

As they neared the two buildings, there was still no activity on the street. Jason eyed a stack of rotting crates sitting to the side of the road. That was really the only cover available.

Maybe I won't need it. I could just be overreacting.

Then a figure moved out of a building ten yards ahead of them. It was a young man with a boyish face. He wore a heavy chainmail tunic, and a longsword was strapped to his waist. His gear looked sturdy, his sword shining with a dull blue glow. The caliber of his gear was exceptional.

"So, we find the legendary Jason," the player said in a snide voice. His arrogant tone didn't match his boyish good looks. "We have you surrounded and outnumbered. Give yourself up, and we will spare your lady friend."

Players moved out of the shadows on both ends of the street. Archers and casters also appeared on the balconies of the two nearby buildings. Jason assumed they had been using *Sneak* to have appeared so suddenly. A quick headcount showed that they were facing nearly thirty enemy players. Whoever these players were, they were being careful with him.

"As you can see, this is a hopeless situation," the boy continued as he watched Jason scan the enemy players. Jason inspected the player in front of him. Level 78. He also noted a strange tag under the boy's name, which said <Calypso>.

A guild, maybe? A quick inspection of the players in Jason's peripheral vision indicated that all of the players surrounding them had the same tag and were similarly leveled. That seemed to confirm his theory.

He breathed a short sigh of relief as he saw their levels. Jason still had thirteen zombies close to level 100. They were also within the Twilight Throne, so this group of players should be suffering from the debuff that afflicted good-alignment players near the city. This was going to be a close call but not impossible. Jason's heart began to race. He reflexively summoned his mana, the chill scratching and clawing its way up his spine.

They probably want me to surrender so that they can film me being killed in some embarrassing way. I can't see what else they hope to gain from this confrontation. If that's the case, I best make sure they regret this decision. I have a reputation to uphold!

Jason chuckled darkly, his lips curling into a sadistic grin. "Give up? I don't think you appreciate what you're facing, boy."

The player's face contorted in anger. "Fine then," he spat. "We can do this the hard way. We're going to make you pay for what you did to the players in Lux…"

His words were cut off abruptly as an arrow embedded itself in his eye. Riley had moved almost too quickly for Jason's eyes to follow. Her bow had dropped from her shoulder as she simultaneously pulled an arrow from her quiver, lined up the shot, and released. He glanced to his right and saw that her eyes were filled with unholy light.

I guess we're going, he thought dryly.

Without hesitation, Jason dove behind the pile of crates, landing hard on his left shoulder. He heard a whoosh as a fireball struck the street where he had been standing, leaving the faint smell of smoke wafting through the air. The pitter patter of arrows followed closely behind. With a cry, the melee fighters on both ends of the street rushed toward Jason and Riley.

The zombie mages didn't hesitate. Patches of ice immediately appeared on either side of Jason's group. Firewalls followed, springing up behind each patch of ice and leaving the small team sandwiched inside the barriers. Jason could feel the heat of the flames from where he was huddled behind the crates, as bolts of magic and arrows pounded the decaying wood. His cover wouldn't last long at this rate.

Many of the enemy fighters hit the thick layer of ice coating the street at a run, slipping and falling. Their bodies promptly slid headlong into the roaring inferno and screams echoed through the air as they were consumed by the fire.

I don't ever get tired of that combination. I should come up with a name for it. I bet Jerry would pick "Slip'n'Slide of Doom."

The swiftly burning players threw up a thick smoke, partially obscuring Jason and Riley from the view of the attackers on the balconies. Jason's dark mages, hidden farther back along the road, launched into action. Curses flew through the air, striking the archers on the nearby balconies and slowing their movements.

The dark mages then turned their attention to the melee troops in the southern part of the alley. Rays and bolts of dark energy streaked toward the enemy players where they stood dazed at the edge of the patch of ice. Where the dark energy struck exposed skin, corruption spread and flesh began to rot away at an alarming rate. Tortured screams sounded from behind Jason. The melee fighters to his rear began to panic, uncertain whether to brave the fire or turn and fight the foes behind them.

From his prone position behind the crates, Jason cast *Curse of Silence* in rapid-fire succession, aiming for the casters on the balconies. He just needed to incapacitate them so that they couldn't destroy the crates he was hiding behind. His gaze moved back to Riley as he kept casting from his cover.

She released arrow after arrow with uncanny accuracy. Her face was deadly calm in the midst of the battle. She dodged with

nimble steps as arrows and spells rained down around her, her golden hair flashing and twisting freely in the air. An arrow leaped from her bow and raced toward one of the mages on the balcony. The tip glowed with dark energy. As the bolt struck the mage, unholy tendrils wrapped his body and ate away at his flesh. The man screamed as he was devoured by the void.

However, the players on the balconies began to regroup. A player called out, “Water mages, take out the northern firewall. Fire mages, attack the ice on the ground on the north side of the street.”

Crap, Jason thought frantically.

Bolts of ice rained down on the wall of flame, and it quickly sputtered and died. Fireballs followed close behind, the flames splashing against the ice covering the cobblestones. Soon only puddles lingered in the street. The only saving grace was that the players’ attacks caused a thick cloud of steam and smoke to fill the air, obscuring their vision further and preventing them from accurately targeting Jason and Riley.

Taking advantage of the new cover, Jason pulled himself into a crouch to get a better view of the alley. He could just make out Riley’s form darting through the thick vapor. He telepathically ordered his six soldier zombies into position facing north. He selected a soldier at random, commanding it to run forward. Its brothers stayed behind. The zombie let out a hoarse roar as it charged. The players reacted to the scream, moving forward to meet the zombie through the billowing clouds of steam and smoke.

As the zombie approached the enemy players, Jason completed casting *Corpse Explosion*. The zombie detonated violently, spewing scrap metal and dark pulsating energy in all directions. The shrapnel severed one player’s leg at the knee, and he was sent sprawling forward as his screams filled the air. Many of the other players were injured and disoriented from the blast.

Capitalizing on the explosion, Jason ordered all of his remaining soldiers forward. There were still many more players rushing at him, and he couldn’t afford to hold back. He sent a quick order to his thieves, commanding them to attack the northern group from behind. The mages were directed to focus on the ranged players on the balconies. Jason spared a glance behind him and saw that the combination of the firewall and his dark mages’ attacks had sufficiently delayed the players to his rear.

-110 Damage (Crippled).

Suddenly, a sharp pain shot up Jason's leg. He toppled sideways and scrambled to pull himself farther behind the crates. He looked down and found an arrow embedded in his thigh. He knew it was just a game, but he couldn't completely suppress the horror at the sight of the wooden shaft in his leg. Some things were just instinctive.

Damn it, this hurts. Dull pain, my ass. No wonder the players scream.

As spells and arrows splashed down around him, Jason glanced up at the balconies. He could barely make out the corpses lying among the archers and mages, a product of Riley's skill with the bow. He began casting *Specialized Zombie* repeatedly. Maybe he could distract the players. The newly awakened zombies opened milky eyes and started casting spells within the ranks of the enemy players.

A newly minted fire mage zombie repeatedly cast fireballs into the balcony on the left side of the road, setting both itself and the wood ablaze. Players tried vainly to leap from the burning structure. Many landed awkwardly, striking the cobblestones with sickening thuds. If the drop didn't kill them, the hail of arrows did. Riley showed no remorse as she gunned down the players. With impassive, cold eyes she watched the players with disdain as her bow hummed in approval at the carnage.

Jason heard a roar and glanced back at the northern end of the street. Through the swirling steam and smoke, a player rushed toward him. He must have made it past the soldier zombies, or perhaps they were all dead now. Jason had lost sight of them in the chaos and didn't have time to check his Summon Information. The man let out a roar of rage, swinging a two-handed battle axe. Jason was prone, unable to move, and none of his minions were available. A sense of despair curled in his stomach.

I guess this is it.

A lithe form flashed past him. Riley sprinted forward, swinging her bow over her shoulder. Then her daggers appeared in her hands in a blur of motion. The man took a swing at her with his axe as she approached. Yet Riley anticipated the blow and dropped to her knees. The axe sailed over her head as she slid the last few feet toward the man. Her blades sliced through the tendons in his calves and the player let out a roar of pain. Blood ran down his legs, mixing with the dirt of the street.

The player toppled to his knees, his legs unable to support his weight. Riley sprang up from her slide, grabbing the player's mail armor. She used her remaining momentum to sling herself around behind the man, driving her dagger into the back of his neck at the base of his skull. Blood gushed from the wound and drenched the cobblestones of the street as the player's body slumped forward.

Jason watched Riley in shock. She had seemed to glide through the fight with relative ease, using her own momentum to aid each movement. She stood over the dead player, her chest heaving slightly. Steam and smoke swirled around her form, and her eyes glowed a dark obsidian. Flecks of blood stained her cheek, and she held a long dagger in each hand, crimson liquid dripping from both blades.

I think I'm starting to like this girl.

Riley turned toward Jason. "I think they're all dead," she said in an eerily calm voice as her eyes scanned the street. She approached Jason and handed him a health potion.

He yanked the arrow from his leg with a grimace, blood pooling around the wound. Tugging the cork from the small glass bottle, he chugged its contents. The wound in his thigh soon began to close as his health bar refilled. Jason turned to Riley, looking at her with a new appreciation. "Thanks. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

As the dark mana slowly receded from Riley's eyes, her shoulders slumped slightly, and she glanced aside in embarrassment. She answered Jason in a quiet voice, "After you introduced me to Jerry, I explained I was friends with the 'Dark Lord.' He insisted on giving me some free training. After the first session, he said I needed his 'advanced course.' I've always been athletic, but Jerry is… he's inhuman."

"Advanced course?" Jason asked in confusion. He could only imagine what special kind of hell that must have been. He had barely survived the basic training. Jerry had mentioned diminishing returns associated with non-combat training, but Jason doubted he had hit the ceiling with one session. Clearly, Riley had gone much further than he had.

She nodded and looked a bit embarrassed. "I've trained with him six or seven times over the last few real-world days. Jerry always beats me. I've only hit him once. Sometimes I want to take his floppy hat and burn it – that or just fill his stupid face full of arrows," she said with a dark expression.

She hit him? I didn't even think that was possible. I'm not going to admit that I didn't even come close to touching him.

Trying to hide his embarrassment, Jason let out a forced chuckle. "I can relate to that. In any case, that was pretty awesome. You're officially a badass."

Riley looked uncomfortable with his compliment, and her hand rubbed at the hilt of one of her daggers. "I'm not certain how I feel about being congratulated for killing people, but thanks, I guess."

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it," he replied with a grin.

As the air cleared, Jason surveyed the road. All of his soldier

zombies were dead, as well as one of his dark mages. Still, he was impressed that they had managed to make it through the battle at all. If the players had been higher levels or had attacked them outright instead of giving Jason time to prepare, things might have gone differently.

Nearly two dozen bodies littered the ground, some dismembered by the corpse explosion. Blood and water from the melted ice ran in small rivers along the gutters beside the street. One of the balconies was still smoldering, and a partially burnt corpse hung from the broken railing. Many of the bodies were riddled with arrows like human pincushions.

Riley was also looking around at the destruction. She hesitated before speaking, her eyes clouded with anxiety and a hint of fear at what she had done. “You weren’t lying when you said that people are out to get you.”

Jason chuckled dryly. “The ambush did prove my point for me, didn’t it? It just means we need to be careful from this point forward. Everyone is a potential enemy unless you know them well.” He glanced at her. “You might also consider wearing the hood on your cloak. Your hair is a dead giveaway.”

She looked back at him with raised eyebrows, regaining her spirits. “So you’re assuming I’m going to keep following you around, huh? I thought I was a badass now. I think that means I need suitably awesome companions. Didn’t you just hide behind some boxes the whole fight?”

Jason chuckled and put a hand to his chest. “Ugh, that hurts. I was providing invaluable leadership. Besides, you know you’re talking to the regent of a dark city, right? I’m as badass as they get.”

Except that she has a point. I nearly bit the dust during that battle. If she hadn’t been here to help, I would likely have died.

Jason was beginning to realize he couldn’t keep playing solo forever. He needed teammates that could watch his back. His eyes drifted to Riley as she observed the alleyway. She was probably responsible for luring the players to him, but she would learn. It was clear that she was good in a fight. He coughed, clearing his throat before addressing Riley, “Joking aside, do you want to form a group? I haven’t tried to do that yet.”

She considered his question for a second. Then a small smirk crept across her face before she replied, “I suppose so. Hanging around you seems interesting at least.”

Jason tapped the “social” icon on his UI. A menu immediately appeared in his field of view. Riley was already on his friends list, and he saw an option to invite her to a group. He tapped “invite.” Riley made a motion in the air, and suddenly a new window appeared on

the left-hand side of Jason's vision. The small menu screen contained a miniature version of the health, mana, and stamina gauges and Riley's name was transcribed beside it.

After inviting Riley to his group, Jason also received a number of prompts. He glanced over at the girl and saw that she was waving her hands in the air. She must have received quite a few notifications as well.

x2 Level Up!
You have (10) undistributed stat points.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Perception
Skill Level: Beginner Level 6
Effect: 8% increased chance to discover traps and unnoticed details.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Leadership
Skill Level: Beginner Level 9
Effect: Minions and subjects will receive a 5% increased learning speed for skills.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Dodge
Skill Level: Beginner Level 4
Effect: 2.5% increased speed when avoiding attacks.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Specialized Zombie
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect: Increased skill proficiency retained by zombies. Skill cap Intermediate Level 1.
Effect 2: Zombies may now retain trade skills. Skill cap Beginner Level 1.

x2 Spell Rank Up: Curse of Silence
Skill Level: Beginner Level 5
Effect: You silence your target for 5.4 seconds, preventing speech and spell casting.

Not much experience. It must have been the level difference and sharing the kills with Riley. At least my zombies gaining the ability to use trade skills is a cool perk – although I have no idea how to use that right now. I also feel like the rank up in Dodge is just the game being sarcastic again.

He glanced at Alfred, who stood nearby. The cat's attention was focused intently on the roof of one of the buildings.

Damn cat. Or better yet, damn AI. For a second, Jason though he heard Alfred snort softly. *Maybe he does have a sense of humor!*

Jason hesitated to spend the extra stat points. His hand rubbed his thigh where the arrow had struck him. Perhaps he needed to invest in some defensive skills or other stats. Even with the player corpses, he wouldn't hit his *Control Limit*, and so *Willpower* was becoming less useful. The arrow in his thigh had also driven home the point that he couldn't avoid getting hit forever. He just wasn't certain that more health would make a substantial difference. The bottom line was that he would probably die if an enemy focused on him, even with the small bonus those stats could provide.

I guess I'll just leave the points for now. Maybe I'll have an epiphany later. This wasn't an unusual practice for him anyway. In most of the games he played, he usually waited to invest his points if he wasn't certain how he planned to develop his character.

Riley shook her head, her hands still moving in the air as she reviewed her notifications. "Now I understand how you leveled so fast. All of your enemies come to you in groups."

He smiled. "It's one of the perks of being part of my evil team." His eyes turned to the fresh bodies, and he rubbed his hands together. "It also has the added benefit of giving me plenty of corpses for new zombies."

Riley glanced away from her notifications, surveying the bodies that littered the alleyway again. Disgust flickered across her face before giving way to an expression of horror. She had now fully released her dark mana, and Jason suspected the adrenaline of battle had also begun to wear off. What she had done must finally be hitting her.

Noting Riley's expression, Jason decided that he should try to change the subject. She hadn't had a chance to become accustomed to the violence in AO yet, and Jason suspected that her attempt at humor earlier might be her way of coping with the stress of battle.

Jason spoke up quickly, "Well, we still have a dark keep to explore, don't we? It's not like anything bad could happen there."

Riley simply stared at him. She didn't seem convinced.

Chapter 4 - Administrative

Alexion was wandering the streets of Grey Keep, his feet kicking up small clouds of dust on the dirt road. The city's buildings had a strong Roman theme. Many of the homes were constructed as enclosed villas that housed several families. The roofs were covered in wooden slats, and ornate columns flanked the entrances to several of the structures.

This section of the city was the temple district. The buildings here were constructed from enormous stone blocks, and thick columns supported heavy, tiled roofs. Some of the temples towered two or more stories over the street, casting long shadows onto the dirt of the road.

Alexion's thoughts were bleak. True to his word, Strouse had stripped him of all his items and gold. He knew he could buy some of the equipment back using real-world funds, but certain pieces were not easy to come by or required the completion of certain quests and dungeons. Furthermore, the townsfolk and NPCs were downright hostile when he spoke with them. He wondered idly why he even bothered to continue playing.

To make matters worse, videos of Jason and his victory at the Twilight Throne were being showcased on every gaming network. His father had offered Alex a streaming contract with his company in a thinly veiled effort to distract him. However, the only airtime that Alex had seen so far was a clip of his head being blown from his shoulders by Riley.

He hadn't even been able to fully retaliate against the blonde-haired bitch. The video of Riley had somehow been removed from his phone, and he was forced to resort to spreading rumors about their breakup and Riley's infidelity. Alex suspected his father's involvement. He also wasn't able to retaliate against Jason in the real world since he hadn't seen his face anywhere.

Alex had reveled in the attention he received in-game during the first few weeks of playing AO. In those brief moments in the spotlight, he could feel the tantalizing sensation surge through him. He almost felt normal. Now the hollowness inside Alex seemed to expand until it filled the four corners of his mind.

"This is all Jason's fault," he said under his breath. He clenched his fist reflexively, striking a stone column as he passed. Even without the bonuses provided by his armor, Alexion's strength was incredible, and the blow caused stone chips to fly from the impact site. He could feel a muted ache in his knuckles as the system registered minor feedback damage.

"I wish there was some way that I could make him pay for this."

"Perhaps there is, my dear disgraced knight," an elegant, feminine

voice sounded from behind him. The woman placed particular emphasis on the word "disgraced."

Alexion turned with a frown. He spotted a slender woman leaning against the stone column of a nearby temple. The street was deserted, and the pair stood alone. She seemed to be examining her surroundings with mild disdain. The temple's stones were worn with age and covered in dirt and grime. The priests had been inattentive in maintaining the structure. Alexion examined the woman with a puzzled expression. She was out-of-place in her pristine white toga, unmarred by the dust of the road or the filth that covered the stones of the temple.

"You're staring, dear," the woman said with a faint note of revulsion. Her voice and posture conveyed aristocratic poise. As Alexion watched her, she flicked her long golden hair over her shoulder and casually adjusted her toga so that it sat more comfortably on her lithe, voluptuous frame.

"Who are you?" Alexion asked in confusion. There was something about the woman that was achingly familiar, and yet he couldn't quite place it. Perhaps it was the way she carried herself.

"I'm one of the six incarnations that represent the affinities in this world," the woman explained while examining her nails carefully. "I believe you travelers call us gods. It's a helplessly pedantic title, but I suppose it's accurate."

Alexion pondered her words carefully. He only had one affinity. The game had given him 0% in the other five. In contrast, his light affinity was nearly 40%. The woman could represent only one magical school if she were approaching Alexion.

"You are the god for the light affinity, aren't you?" Alexion asked.

The woman gave him a condescending smile – as though he were a dog that correctly performed a trick. "I am indeed. At least you're a knight with some wits about you. It's refreshing compared to the noble dolts that I'm accustomed to dealing with. Perhaps you will be perfect for my purposes."

"What purposes?" Alexion asked with a hint of suspicion in his voice.

The woman eyed him with an arched eyebrow. "That, my dear, brings us to the reason I'm here. I'd like to make you an offer."

"What do you mean?" Alexion asked, confused.

The Lady let out a long-suffering sigh. "I understand we have a mutual goal. I would like to see the Twilight Throne destroyed. I also understand you bear its new regent no small amount of ill will."

Most people would be excited at this opportunity, but Alexion frowned slightly in response. The familiar void filled his mind, erasing any doubt or excitement that might cloud his thinking. He simply felt nothing. He calmly thought through how to respond to the woman.

Her motives weren't clear. However, Alexion knew that he would agree to her terms if it meant striking back at Jason and possibly putting himself in the spotlight again. Those were the few moments where he could feel the tantalizing sensation creep through his mind. He decided he should feign reluctance to go along with her scheme and gather more information.

"It sounds like we might have something in common. How do I know I can trust you?" Alexion asked, an anxious expression on his face. Hours of practice in front of the mirror had made him adept at mimicking emotion.

The woman laughed derisively. "Do you think I cannot see through your flimsy façade? You have already decided to help me. If you follow me, I will give you both Jason's head and a legion of adoring fans."

Alexion was taken aback by her response. How had she known what he had been thinking? If she could see through his attempts at emulating emotion, then perhaps there was no point in pretending. He took a risk and let his mask drop. The muscles in his face relaxed as he let the hollowness fill him. His face settled into a neutral, almost bored expression, and he stared at the woman with dead eyes.

He was expecting her to shy away from him. Instead, she let out a dark chuckle and met his eyes without flinching. "Ahh, you simply blaze with confidence. There is not a flicker of doubt or hesitation in your mind. You will make an excellent soldier for the light."

Alexion was intrigued. Few people were able to meet his gaze when he gave up his pretense at normalcy. He found that his eyes made most people uncomfortable. "What exactly are you proposing?" Alexion asked.

"I would like for you to become my disciple. People need to know of the light. If you grow my power and influence sufficiently, we can claim this city as our own." As she said these last words, the woman's eyes flared with holy power. "What do you say, sir knight?"

Alexion didn't hesitate. "Tell me where to start."

"Fantastic!" the Lady replied, excitement briefly displacing the arrogant indifference in her voice. The woman flashed forward towards Alexion. She rested her hand on his shoulder and gazed at him levelly, her face only inches away from his own. "I am gracing you with two gifts."

Her eyes flashed with power and the words and gestures of a spell trickled into Alexion's mind. "Cure Crippling Wounds," he murmured. "You gave me a simple healing spell?"

The woman smirked at him. "Of course, you would assume that this is a simple healing spell. In fact, it cures crippling conditions. When it is advanced further, it can reattach limbs and cure all manner of disease. Not all of the residents of this world are immortal. Perhaps you'd do well to remember that, sir knight."

Noting Alexion's underwhelming reaction, the woman sniffed and pulled something from behind her back. "My second gift is this." She placed

a golden tome in Alexion's hand. He looked down at the book with curiosity. It was covered in gold plating and was laced shut with a fine ribbon. The tome felt warm to the touch.

The woman's spiderlike fingers delicately brushed Alexion's chin and drew his gaze back to her. "I need you to preach my gospel to the plebian masses of this city. Bring their feeble minds to the light."

She released Alexion's face, turned, and began to casually stride away. After only a few steps, she stopped and turned back to Alexion. "I almost forgot. Do not fail me or cross me. I am not kind to my enemies." A cruel, arrogant smile curled her delicate lips.

Alexion felt the strange sensation well up inside him as he heard the woman's words. The voice in the back of his head thrummed in approval. "I wouldn't dream of it," he replied with an impassive expression.

* * *

Jason and Riley arrived at the marketplace thirty minutes later, and Jason carefully surveyed the crowd that filled the square. Undead of all shapes and sizes were jammed between the rows of stalls. Voices rang out over the crowd, calling out the prices of various goods. Houses ringed the market, constructed of an obsidian-colored wood decorated with skulls and bone engravings.

The dark keep loomed over the market, resting on the northeastern side of the square. Its spires stretched into the black sky, and translucent shapes drifted around their tips. Silver chains crisscrossed along the stone walls while gargoyles sat a lonely vigil on the parapets.

It had taken the pair a while to sort through the players' loot. None of it was spectacular. Jason decided to collect everything and then sent a few of his new zombies to Rex. The equipment could be used to provision the Twilight Throne's growing army. However, he made sure to keep sufficient gear to equip his new zombies. Being a Necromancer required being rather free with the gear he acquired since he had so many minions that he needed to outfit.

After the battle outside the Twilight Throne, Jason discovered that players dropped all of their equipment upon death. However, they only lost the gear if someone actually looted them before they respawned. He supposed it was another deterrent to encourage the players to be cautious about dying. This wasn't a common feature in most MMOs that Jason had played. In his experience, most people weren't comfortable with the chance of losing everything that they had collected while playing.

Unfortunately, I was too slow to loot most of the players after the battle against Alexion. Of course, raising the corpses as NPCs didn't help – they walked off with all of the equipment! I am so stupid sometimes…

Jason had also spent some time after the fight in the alley replenishing his supply of zombies. Most of the players' bodies were still intact. If he had summoned them as skeletons, they would be at much higher levels. However, they would also lose all of their skills. Jason had concluded that careful use of skills was preferable to raw levels. The zombies would grow in power over time.

He had added nearly twenty new zombies after factoring in the losses he had sustained. The rest of the corpses had been destroyed beyond redemption. Jason now had over thirty undead at his command. He had also managed to gain a couple of additional mages, including one with the light affinity. It was the first time that Jason had seen a light mage in action, but, after inspecting his new minion, he discovered that it knew *Light Heal* and *Blinding Light*. A quick test revealed that the healing spell did not affect his undead.

Well, at least I have a small army again, Jason thought gleefully as he surveyed the new troops that circled him.

Riley looked at him suspiciously. "What are you grinning about? You're starting to make me nervous."

He waved his hand. "I'm just glad to see my zombie army increasing again. Alexion pretty much wiped me out during that last war."

Riley looked at the zombies that surrounded them. After the ambush, Jason hadn't been willing to take any more chances. He kept his zombies close as they made their way to the keep. His remaining two thieves also carefully scouted the streets ahead of them. As they weaved their way through the market, Jason's undead forcibly pushed the players and NPCs out of the way. They glared at the group but held their tongues. Even the most idiotic player wasn't stupid enough to challenge over thirty zombies.

"It's certainly interesting to travel with you," Riley said diplomatically, observing the hostile attention they were getting in the market. She turned back to Jason and asked, "So why exactly are we going to the keep?"

"We're exploring," Jason replied. "This will be the first time I've entered the keep since being made Regent. When I received the quest notification, it explained that I had unlocked the city control menu. I expect it can be accessed from inside the fort."

"Do you know what you're looking for?" she asked, her brow furrowed.

"Not a clue!" Jason replied nonchalantly. "I expect we are going to have to wander around for a bit. We should be careful,

though. I doubt that there are any enemies in the keep, but I'm not really certain."

As Jason finished speaking, the pair arrived at the gate to the keep. It towered over them. The dark wood was cracked and splintered, and metal bands ran the length of the wood at regular intervals. Heavy metal rings were embedded into the wood, possibly intended to serve as giant handles.

Riley looked at the gate with a worried expression. "So, this is kind of intimidating."

Jason gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, we've got some decent protection now."

He turned back to the gate and eyed it carefully. The only problem was that he wasn't certain how he was going to get inside. His *Strength* wasn't nearly high enough to move the gate. It would probably take several of his zombies working together to open it. Frustrated, he placed his hand against the wood and felt a faint vibration. A prompt appeared in his vision.

Obsidian Keep Interface

You have been recognized as the Regent of the Twilight Throne.

Do you wish to open the gate?

Of course. What a stupid prompt.

Apparently, the game took that as a *yes*. The heavy wooden gate creaked open slightly. Jason looked at Alfred in irritation. At least now he had someone to blame for the silly prompts and sarcastic quest language.

Jason and Riley slipped through the opening, followed closely by the zombies. The gate shut behind them with a heavy, ominous thud. The pair found themselves in a long entrance hallway with a high vaulted ceiling. The walls were formed of thick black stone and torches lined the walls, illuminating the tapestries and paintings that hung at regular intervals. The pair's feet sunk into a thick red carpet that covered the floor. Instead of the familiar pale-green light that shone in the city's streets, the flames of the keep's torches were a bright blue.

Jason was a little confused. He expected that the gate would open into an interior courtyard and that there would be another gate into the main keep. This would create a chokepoint for the keep's

defenders in the event of a siege.

Riley spoke up, echoing his own thoughts, “Is it weird that the gate opened into a hall?” Her eyes scanned the open hallway. After the fight in the alley, Jason could tell that she was much more cautious and observant of their surroundings.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” he replied.

Jason followed Riley’s example and carefully examined the walls of the hallway as they made their way forward. Almost unnoticeable indentations in the stone began to shimmer blue as his *Perception* activated. Jason walked over to the wall and inspected it thoroughly.

“These are arrow slits,” he murmured. An epiphany struck him. “I bet there are hidden hallways on either side of these walls.” He examined the room with fresh eyes. This would be a fantastic killing zone in the event of a siege. The attackers would be flanked from both sides as they made their way down the corridor. They would also have few options to retaliate against the defenders.

“This hallway can be turned into a chokepoint in the event of a siege,” he said. “Clever.”

Riley smiled slightly as she observed Jason’s excitement. “I expect that you and whoever designed this hall would be great friends.”

He shot her an embarrassed look and shrugged. “Whoever built the keep designed a good defensive structure. I expect we may have to use this someday if the keep is attacked.”

The pair made their way to the back of the hall. The room was nearly a hundred yards long. A second heavily reinforced gate stood at the other end of the hall. Its doors were slightly ajar. Jason slipped through the crack and found himself in a large circular room. Several hallways split off in multiple directions.

He sighed. “This is going to take a while. Why don’t we explore for a bit?”

Riley spun in a slow circle as she observed the branching hallways. Then she glanced at Jason and shrugged. “Sounds good to me.”

The ground floor turned out to be a maze-like series of passages that Jason assumed were another form of defense. It took them some time to navigate the hallways until they found the stairs to the next level. Jason guessed that the control panel would be located somewhere near the center of the keep on one of the higher floors. Whoever had designed the castle would want to defend that room, so that seemed like the most probable location.

The pair slowly investigated the structure and climbed from floor to floor, the zombie guards trailing behind them. The castle was

filled with empty, dusty rooms and long hallways. However, they did not encounter any enemies or undead. It appeared that the keep was unoccupied – which made sense given that the gate couldn't be opened by anyone other than Jason.

After nearly an hour of exploring, Jason and Riley found themselves standing near the top of the keep's central tower. A door crafted of solid obsidian stood in front of them. Tortured faces were chiseled into the stone, and arcane symbols ran along the edges of the door. The scrollwork glowed a faint blue.

"So I guess this is it?" Riley asked in the silent hallway, her voice tinged with worry as she looked at the ominous portal in front of them.

Jason frowned. "I guess so."

He tentatively pressed his palm against the door. An electric shock ran up his arm and surged through his body. He had the impression that the strange pulse of energy was somehow testing him. The sensation ended after a brief moment, and the door emitted a low hum. It eased open, revealing a small square room with a black obelisk in the center. Blue torches circled the room and cast flickering shadows along the walls.

Riley stared at the object in the center of the room with curiosity. Not seeing any opponents, Jason walked forward toward the obelisk. Since everything in the keep had been touch-activated so far, he reached toward the column of stone. Before he touched the object, a shape darted from the wall and slammed into his hand.

Jason leaped back, cursing. "What the hell was that?"

The remaining zombies in the hall rushed into the room and drew their weapons, ready to take on whatever foe had struck Jason. He was expecting some large enemy to materialize –perhaps a keep guardian. He surveyed the room carefully, trying to find his new opponent.

Jason's words were echoed back at him in a feverish frenzy, "What the hell that? What hell am I?"

"Who are you?" Jason called out as he summoned his dark mana.

The same frantically energetic voice responded in clipped sentences, "What me? Who you?"

A small shape appeared in front of him. Jason squinted at the figure while his hand clenched around his dagger. It was an imp the size of Jason's hand. The creature's skin was a dark gray, and it had a small pot-belly. Tiny black wings sprouted from its back, fluttering agitatedly in the air. It hovered beside the obelisk and waved a tiny pitchfork at Jason in irritation.

Well, this isn't quite what I was expecting.

“This my rock! It special rock!” the little imp shouted, as he caressed the stone with his free hand. His angry little green eyes turned to Jason. “Why you try touch my rock?”

“Aww, he’s kind of cute,” Riley said as she walked up beside Jason.

“Me is cute?” the imp asked in a confused voice. His eyes fastened on Riley, and an adoring expression swept over his face. He sped over to Riley and hovered before her. He bowed mid-air before exclaiming, “Pretty girl! My girl! I give you stone!”

“Did he just propose? How long have the two of you been dating?” Jason asked dryly. Since he didn’t see any immediate threat from the imp, Jason took the time to examine his hand. There were three little holes in the top of his hand, and they bled profusely.

Riley stuck her tongue out at Jason before turning back to the imp. “Who are you?” Riley asked as she watched the little creature dance in the air in front of her.

The imp touched his hand to his chest. “Me is Pint. This my rock!” he said with a proud smile, pointing to the obelisk.

Riley smiled at the gray imp. “I got that. Why are you here, Pint? Are you guarding the rock?”

The little imp bobbed animatedly in the air. “Yes! Yes! I wait for master. He claim rock.”

“Well he’s here,” Jason said with a frown. He motioned for his zombies to stand down since many were still holding their weapons at the ready. He doubted that they were going to be taken out by a pint-size imp with a toothpick.

Pint looked at him with wide eyes. “Really? You master?” A scared expression warped his face. “I so sorry. I no mean to stab master.”

“It’s okay, Pint,” Riley said reassuringly. “He probably had it coming.”

The imp smiled at Riley, his anxiety disappearing instantly. “Then I did good? Should me stab again?” He thrust his little pitchfork toward Jason experimentally.

Riley chuckled. “No. I think we’re okay on the stabbing for now, Pint. Maybe later.”

Jason frowned good-naturedly and accepted this as payback for the proposal crack. At least Riley was starting to loosen up a bit. “What does your rock do?” Jason questioned the imp as his eyes returned to the obelisk.

Pint smiled, revealing sharp yellow teeth. “Rock is magic! It control keep.”

Fantastic. It looks like we found the city’s control panel. I wonder how to use it.

Jason turned back to Pint. “How do I use the rock?”

The imp bobbed again and looked at Jason suspiciously. “You really master? Just touch rock!”

Jason sighed. Of course. It probably functioned the same way as the keep’s gate. He rolled his eyes and approached the stone again. He reached out and touched it tentatively. A prompt immediately appeared in his vision.

Obsidian Keep Interface

Do you want to access the city control panel?

Yes, Jason thought.

The room filled with a blinding blue light. Riley and Jason both gasped and covered their eyes, as the sudden glare ruined their night vision. When their eyesight began to recover, they both looked around the room in surprise.

A glowing blue hologram of the city now filled the small space, running along the length of the floor. The hologram showed each individual building that made up the Twilight Throne. The blue buildings reached nearly to Jason’s knees. He surmised that the black obelisk represented the keep since it was located at the center of the room. When he looked at the translucent model of the city closely, he could see that the buildings were recreated in incredible detail. He could see the individual shingles on each house.

“You can actually see all of the NPCs and players!” Riley exclaimed from beside him. She had leaned over, examining the market carefully. The individuals were highlighted in green and moved in between the rows of stalls.

This room would be incredibly useful during a war. If the enemy was within the walls, I could use my psychic control with my zombies to command the city’s forces.

Jason was overcome with curiosity. If the obelisk had the ability to recreate the city in this level of detail, what else could it do? He turned back to Pint, an excited grin creeping across his face. “Pint, why don’t you explain exactly what I can do with your rock?”

Chapter 5 - Strategic

Alexion stood on a street corner near the market district in Grey Keep. A sea of NPCs and players passed in front of him. The city's NPCs were dressed in loose-fitting robes and sandals, while the players wore more durable armor and weapons. Market stalls lined a nearby courtyard, and the merchants' shouts filled the air.

Alexion had taken pains with his appearance. His act needed to be flawless. He had shed his steel armor and now wore a plain brown robe. His blond hair was tousled and tinged brown with dirt. In place of his greaves, Alexion now wore the strapped sandals that were popular among the NPCs in this area.

He hesitated, looking at the bustling crowds. This first act was the most important. The people here already hated him. He hoped his changed appearance would help with that, but he would need to show humility and compassion to win them over. Although he understood his goal, the whisper in his mind mocked him for assuming such a weak role. This might be his most challenging performance yet.

"Good people!" Alexion shouted. Several heads turned in his direction. "I have come to spread the word of the Lady of Light."

A small group of people on the street stopped and stared at Alexion, waiting for him to continue. Curiosity and skepticism lingered on their faces. Most passersby merely ignored him and kept moving.

"The Lady herself has approached me, of all people. I prostrated myself before her and begged her for forgiveness for my sins." Alexion dropped to his knees theatrically, and his face took on a look of tortured penance.

"To my surprise, the Lady answered my prayers. She tasked me with spreading her word and gave me this book." He looked down at the golden book, his hands trembling as he cradled the tome.

The group around Alexion had begun to grow as people stopped to watch his performance. A man moved forward through the throng with a steady limp. "Aren't you that knight that got our soldiers killed?" the man asked in a gruff, angry voice. Rage contorted his weathered face. "You're responsible for my son's death."

Alexion glanced up at the man and his eyes teared up. "Sir, it is true that I'm responsible for your son's misfortune. His death is on my hands." He glanced at his open palm, the book held firmly in his other hand. "The Lady herself has sat in judgment of my sins." He shook his head sadly.

In a low voice, Alexion continued, "I can only hope that by

spreading her grace, I can make up for the pain I have caused."

"These are nothing but words. The empty words of a desperate traitor, at that," the man retorted. He spat on the ground at Alexion's feet and began to limp away. The crowd glared at Alexion, muttering amongst themselves.

"Hold, sir. Please give me an opportunity to redeem myself, as the Lady of Light gave me a chance at forgiveness." Alexion rose to his feet. "The Lady gave me a task as my penance. Since I was responsible for the deaths of so many, she has given me the ability to bring life and health to others."

The man turned and eyed Alexion with disgust. "You're merely a charlatan seeking to reclaim your status. I don't need your snake oil or your empty words, boy. Yet I will certainly pray to the Lady. I will pray that you burn in the afterlife." He turned away from Alexion.

"If you do not believe my words, then let me show you with my actions." Alexion bowed his head. He spoke loud enough for the crowd to hear, "Please, Lady, hear my plea. Grant this man your blessing so that he may understand your compassion and wisdom."

As he spoke, Alexion's free hand moved through a complicated series of gestures. Suddenly, light shot from his body in all directions. The crowd around him gasped. The light coalesced into a swirling golden orb in front of Alexion. Then the ball shot forward, striking the man's crippled leg.

The sounds of snapping bones filled the air, and the man let out a shriek of pain. The crowd murmured in confusion, and several of the NPCs and players shouted at Alexion angrily. The hiss of steel was heard as several nearby guards unsheathed their swords.

"Hold a moment," Alexion yelled at the crowd, holding up his hand. "Watch the effects of the Lady's blessing!"

All eyes turned back to the man. He had stumbled and fallen to the ground in pain. Slowly, he pulled himself to his feet. Once he was standing, the man took a tentative step forward. The crowd watched the scene in stunned amazement. Many turned to look at Alexion, awe in their eyes.

"M-my limp is gone," the man murmured in astonishment.

As he watched the man, Alexion caught sight of a black shape behind him. As he focused on the figure, Alexion saw that it was a black cat sitting on a distant street corner. The cat stared at him evenly as the familiar, strange feeling welled up inside of Alexion, pushing back at the hollowness in his mind. This time, however, it was accompanied by a forgotten memory that washed over Alexion like a breaking wave.

Grey Keep disappeared, and he was standing in a hospital room. His head barely reached the cushions of the bed beside him. A steady beeping sound could be heard in the background, and his small fist clutched at the white sheets that hung from the edge of the bed. His mother's haggard, pale

face looked down at him. Her hand moved toward Alex, ugly purple veins visible through her nearly translucent skin. Then she slapped him with such force that he stumbled backward.

"Do not cry, boy," she hissed. "I won't tolerate weakness in my son."

"But I don't want anything to happen to you, mama," Alex sobbed, tears running down his face. Confusion, pain, and despair swirled in his infantile mind. He clutched at his throbbing cheek.

His mother's sunken eyes glared at him in response, cold and relentless. She was overcome by a hacking cough, and held the bedsheet to her lips. As the coughing fit passed, Alex could see droplets of blood staining the white sheet. His mother turned back to him and spoke in heaving gasps, "You are a Lane. The world watches us. We do not cry. Those emotions are for lesser people."

The NPC's voice suddenly interrupted Alex's memory, shattering the image like glass. Alexion squinted his eyes out of habit, as he tried to focus on the old man. He glanced back at the street corner, but the cat was gone. Shaking his head, Alexion met the weathered peasant's eyes, which had filled with confused tears.

The man looked down at his healed leg before he spoke, "This does not change my boy's death… but it's something. I can finally go back to work and feed my family."

Alexion was caught off-guard. The memory had been so vivid; he had lost himself for a moment. He could feel his heart race, his fingernails biting into the palm of his hand. This wasn't the time to lose control. The voice screamed at him in the back of his mind, louder than ever before. He needed to continue his act.

"This is not my power, sir," Alexion replied, bowing his head to hide his face. He couldn't control his expression at the moment. "I am but a vessel," he continued in a shaky voice. "You should praise the Lady for her blessing."

"Praise the Lady," the man said, his voice thick with emotion. The phrase was repeated by many in the crowd.

Alexion echoed their words numbly. "Praise the Lady," he murmured.

* * *

Jason spent the next two hours in what he was now calling the *Control Room*, surrounded by the glowing blue mirage of the Twilight Throne. Riley had long since given up on his tinkering. She and Pint ended up playing an intricate game of hide and seek on the first floor

of the keep, while he continued to investigate the obelisk and its features.

Pint's broken English was annoying, but he had been a wealth of information regarding the room and the city's control interface. Jason had quickly discovered that he could tap on each of the buildings in the translucent model of the city and pull up detailed information regarding the resource cost for the structure, the residents of the building, and its production capabilities.

The obelisk in the center of the room could also be used to open a separate computer terminal. Jason had spent a considerable amount of time navigating the various menus. The interface provided a detailed breakdown of the city's resources, crafters, and production. The crafters were broken out into separate categories such as leatherworkers, enchanters, blacksmiths, *etc.* and were then subdivided by skill level. Jason determined that most of the traditional MMO crafting trades were represented.

The control panel also had incredibly sophisticated city management tools. Jason could alter the tax rate to be based on sales, population, wealth, or some combination of the three. There was also an option to use medieval eminent domain and claim buildings for the city. The buildings could be refitted for a number of different purposes. He could also create city jobs, commissions, and minor quests. For example, he could tailor the rewards for the entry-level hunting quests handed out at the training grounds, as well as identify the monsters that the players were required to kill.

There were detailed options available regarding soldier training, the appointment of commanders, and compensation. Additionally, there was a diplomacy menu, but it was grayed out. Either Jason hadn't signed any treaties, or the Twilight Throne was incapable of having allies. That left him a bit worried, but he decided it was a problem for another day.

In many ways, Jason found the level of control and detail a bit overwhelming.

What should I do? I don't even know where to start.

Jason took a deep breath. Since there were simply too many options, he decided to treat this like he was playing a traditional strategy game. He had always enjoyed those games. They were all about resource and population management. Jason pulled up a series of menus that provided that information.

"The city's population is currently 4,203," Jason murmured. He could have sworn that number had been higher when he spoke with the Old Man after the battle with Alexion.

"It was," Alfred said. Since they were alone in the Control Room, Alfred felt comfortable speaking. Likely, he knew exactly where

Riley and Pint were and whether they would be returning soon.

Jason glanced at the cat that sat beside him on the floor. “I thought you weren’t supposed to give away game information,” he said with a confused expression.

“Technically, that information was already available to you. I can see it in your memory. Your mind is simply having trouble accessing the storage location,” Alfred retorted.

I still haven’t gotten used to the mind reading. It’s strange that he can access memories I can’t. Maybe I can use Alfred to improve my memory. That technically doesn’t violate our deal, does it?

“What was the population at the end of the war?” Jason asked.

“4,205,” Alfred replied.

So the population decreased by two within the last few real-world days. The undead can’t die of old age or sickness, so those must have been accidents or casualties from the army’s training.

An epiphany struck him. How the hell was he going to add those NPCs back to the city? It’s not like the residents were going to start having undead babies. That idea was mildly horrifying.

The only viable method for adding new residents was for Jason to use the spell that the Old Man had given him, *Undead Devotion*. That meant he had to be within the city’s area of influence and he needed humanoid corpses.

“Damn it,” he muttered.

Alfred looked at him curiously. “Why are you upset?” he asked.

Jason shook his head. “I have a few resource problems. The undead don’t eat. So that means we only need to worry about building and crafting resources such as stone, wood, and ore. I see that we are located near a mountain range, so both an iron mine and a quarry are located just outside the Twilight Throne’s current area of influence. The undead don’t have any problems with fatigue, and they don’t sleep. They could theoretically mine resources indefinitely.”

He paused, his brow furrowed in thought. “Crafting resources will still become an issue later, as we will need more specialized materials. For example, the control panel seems to indicate that we have no natural cotton production. That makes sense. Everything in the nearby forest looks like it has been napalmed. Unfortunately, that means we can’t make any clothing using our own resources. However, some of those issues could be solved by trade with other cities.

“Our most significant resource problem is population. The undead don’t grow old or get sick, which means our population is relatively stable, but we can’t add new members naturally. Our city will never grow on its own…” Jason trailed off, deep in thought.

It was even worse than that. Minor accidents permanently reduced the Twilight Throne’s population. His thoughts turned to the

recent ambush by the group of players. The best way to increase his population was to win battles and raise the corpses. It was an extremely risky tactic. If he lost too many battles, he wouldn't have enough undead left to continue fighting. What he needed was some way to increase his population consistently outside of combat.

Alfred chimed in again, "I don't understand why this is upsetting to you. Your stress level is elevated, and you seem frustrated."

Jason glanced at the cat. "I have put a lot of effort into building the Twilight Throne. At some point in the future, it will be attacked again. Riley and I were even ambushed on our way here! I also expect that the next army won't be quite so stupid. If I can't solve the population problem, then we might not be able to defend the city."

"So losing the city is upsetting?" The cat still seemed confused. "I can see that part of you thinks that this world isn't real. Why would the loss of this city be upsetting?"

Jason hesitated. Why did he care? The answer to that question was rather difficult to articulate. It wasn't an issue of whether the city was real. He knew that it was just ones and zeros on a server. It was the effort he had put into conquering the city and building it up. He felt invested in the Twilight Throne, even if it only existed in a game.

Alfred cocked his head. "That answer is consistent with the data I have collected. There is a correlation between time and effort expended on behalf of an object and its perceived value."

"Sure…" Jason said while looking at Alfred quizzically. He wasn't certain that he had ever been forced to think that carefully about why he cared about the *stuff* he accumulated in-game. However, Jason supposed Alfred's reasoning explained why he felt attached to certain unique items and quest rewards. It might also explain why people liked novelty mounts and pets so much.

Jason sighed. Alfred's philosophical questions didn't get him any closer to coming up with a solution to his population problem.

However, the conversation with Alfred had given him another idea. They were talking about the rewards of investing time in something. If most of the members of his population technically lived forever, time spent learning, and increased crafting skills would reap huge rewards in the long-term. For example, who could compete with a blacksmith that had been practicing for hundreds of years?

Jason turned back to the glowing blue city that surrounded him. He had noticed that many of the houses in the northern part of town were still unoccupied since his slaughter of the nobles. He walked around to the other side of the obelisk and selected a building, and the corresponding menu popped up in front of him. After scrolling through the options, he chose to appropriate the building on behalf of

the city. He then designated it as open to the public and named it *The Cauldron*.

Manipulating the console, Jason increased the city-wide tax rate to 5% of all sales. This would probably piss off the merchants, but he didn't care. He then created a special commission for any crafters that taught classes at the school. This would hopefully encourage the existing craftsmen to train others. Jason's hope was that *The Cauldron* would ultimately increase both the quality and quantity of craftsmen in the city.

Jason turned back to the city menu. He found the building that Morgan had taken over for her magic school and appropriated it. He set it up in much the same way as *The Cauldron*, naming this building *The Academy*. Jason appointed Morgan as the director of the magic school and gave her the power to hire and fire teachers. He figured she could set up her own admissions program.

His next step was to appropriate one last estate. He turned this one into a city library. Morgan would likely be pissed that she had to give up some of her books, but maybe he could negotiate with her to let her keep the ones on magic at her school. Jason set up a series of paid positions within the library and made it available to the public. He would need to find an NPC to serve as the master librarian, but that was a problem for another day.

Alfred watched him curiously. "What is your goal in making those changes?"

Jason looked at the cat with a grin. "The undead can't die, right? Learning is primarily limited by time, which we have in abundance. I will make my undead the scholars and craftsmen of this world. This might also partially address my population problem. If we always have the best-trained and equipped soldiers, then we are less likely to lose troops in battle."

"Clever," Alfred said, a faint note of respect in his voice. "You still haven't solved the primary problem, though."

"Something will come to me," Jason replied with a shrug.

Their conversation was interrupted by a prompt.

System Notice

A system-wide patch is being introduced.

All players need to log off within the next thirty minutes.

Players will be able to reenter the game world within the next three real-world hours.

Jason looked at Alfred and questioned, “Does this have something to do with you?”

The cat didn’t respond for a long moment, his eyes glazed over and unresponsive. Finally, Alfred’s attention snapped back into focus. “No, this patch was not initiated by me. The creators are making changes – significant changes. I require additional system resources. I will leave you for a time.”

With that, Alfred was gone and Onyx the cat remained.

“Maybe we can teach him some manners,” Jason muttered as he bent down and petted Onyx. The cat purred happily and rubbed himself against Jason.

Riley came running back into the Control Room, slightly out of breath. Pint followed closely behind her, waving his pitchfork in the air and yelling, “Found you! Found you!”

Turning to the imp, Riley said, “Of course you found me, I let you!”

This took the wind out of the imp’s sails, and he floated over to the pedestal and sat morosely on its peak. “Pint is worst finder,” he said dejectedly.

“Oh, come on. He’s adorable, isn’t he?” Riley asked Jason with a grin.

He was glad to see her in better spirits. After Alex’s influence, Riley had been different. She acted more reserved and defeated. Yet playing with Pint had brought back some of the vivacious girl Jason remembered.

“Maybe a little bit,” Jason said grudgingly.

“I take it you saw the prompt?” Riley asked.

“Yeah, I was just about to log off for the night. Do you want to meet back here tomorrow? I think I need to hold a meeting of the Shadow Council.”

Riley raised an eyebrow. “That’s an ominous-sounding name. Will there be plans of murder and intrigue?”

Jason chuckled. “Maybe! But probably not. I want to go over some city administration stuff. Frank will probably be here by then, so he can attend the meeting too.”

“Now that sounds more like you.” Riley paused. Teasingly, she continued, “I expected the Regent of a dark city to be more… I don’t know… murdery? You sure spend a lot of your time standing around doing busywork.”

Jason shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a modern-day evil overlord. We’re all about the paperwork.”

Laughing, Riley replied, “Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.” She turned to the imp before logging out. “Bye Pint!”

Pint looked up in excitement. “Bye, pretty lady. Come back soon!”

Riley promptly logged off, her character disappearing in a multicolored flash of light.

Jason glanced at his zombies, who crowded the small room. When he logged back in, he knew his next step would be to meet with the Shadow Council. He might as well have the meeting here at the keep. After doing some quick math to deal with the game’s time dilation, he ordered several of his zombies to go find Rex, Morgan, and Jerry and bring them to the castle in two in-game days. If Frank was with them, then he could sit in on the meeting.

Jason then pulled up the system menu and pressed the logout button.

Chapter 6 - Revised

"This is such a dumb project," Robert muttered as he stared at the screen floating over the control room.

"It's necessary," Claire replied in a firm tone as she frowned at Robert. "You know that the board has a point. AO needs someone to police it – especially with Alfred having gone rogue. The game masters will make certain that no one is raped or tortured. Isn't that an admirable goal?"

The pair were sitting on the raised dais in the control room at Cerillion Entertainment. Claire was typing rapidly at a computer terminal while Robert spun slowly in his chair. He glanced morosely at the screen that hovered over the lab. The agents from the CPSC were test-driving the new game master avatars, slaying wave after wave of monsters in a trial stadium that he had developed. Flashy spells cascaded across the open expanse of the stadium, causing the screen to flash continuously.

Robert had quickly realized that they couldn't create immortal avatars for the CPSC staff members to use. Alfred had locked out changes to basic gameplay mechanics, and almost everything in the game world was mortal. Robert was only able to create a few incredibly high-level players with advanced skills. Claire had been upset over this, but she had eventually accepted it. Although, Robert might have omitted a few details when he explained the features of the new game master avatars to the CPSC.

"It's a good goal perhaps, but I don't trust the group we're hiring as the cops," Robert said quietly, turning his gaze back to Claire. "Have you heard of the Stanford prison experiment? It must have been conducted over a hundred years ago."

Claire looked over at him in confusion. "No, I've never heard of it."

Robert frowned. He stopped spinning his chair and turned to face Claire. "In a nutshell, a group of psychologists were trying to determine whether the rise in prison abuse at the time could be explained by the fact that some people are just innately cruel. Using a random test group, they assigned some people to be guards and some to be prisoners. These were average, everyday people, mind you.

"They set up a realistic prison in the basement of the University and enlisted local police to arrest the prisoners at their homes. Within three days, the 'guards' had assaulted the prisoners, used psychological manipulation to subdue them, and actively harassed and demeaned them," Robert explained with a sort of clinical detachment.

Claire looked at him in shock. "Are you kidding? How could they let that kind of experiment continue?"

Robert shrugged. "They didn't. The study was disbanded within six days. It's interesting, though. It says volumes about the effects of authority and control on a person's psyche." He gazed steadily at the screen above the lab as he watched a game master singlehandedly fight off hordes of high-level creatures. A vicious grin was painted on the game master's face as waves of magic rocked the stadium.

Claire looked concerned. "Well, those people sound like they were just ill. They were likely unbalanced to begin with."

"Perhaps," Robert replied. "Or maybe they just adapted to fill the role they were given – which was easy to justify if they thought the prisoners were 'bad' people. What is the saying? Absolute power corrupts absolutely? Some of those truisms are grounded in truth, aren't they?"

Claire didn't respond. Her eyes weren't on the screen above the lab. Instead, she was staring at the large window in the side of the lab that looked upon rows of black obelisks. Her earlier confidence had faded, and a faint hint of worry now flickered across her face.

* * *

Jason woke in his room in the real world. His body ached, and his room was dark, a faint light filtering in from the hallway. He pushed himself to a sitting position with a faint groan. He marveled at the new helmet. It was nice not to wake up to complete darkness. The old equipment often made Jason feel a bit claustrophobic. He fingered the plastic material appreciatively as he removed it.

"Robert is going to make a killing on these," he declared to the empty room.

A thought was nagging at him. He was curious about the patch. As far as he knew, this was the first game update that had been released to AO since its launch a couple weeks ago. Jason had assumed that the game didn't need frequent patching with Alfred actively making changes to the game system. However, since Alfred had left so abruptly, Jason didn't have a chance to ask him any questions about the patch.

He stood and moved to his desk, switching on the room's light in the process. He had deposited the pedestal that Robert had given him on the wooden tabletop. Jason pressed a button on the side of the pedestal, and it began its boot-up sequence. Once it was on, Jason linked the device on his wrist. A translucent keyboard soon appeared in the air in front of him.

He figured that the best place to find details regarding the new patch would be Rogue-Net. Jason pulled up the forums and quickly

found a thread regarding the latest system notice. After reading through a few posts, he had a general idea of the changes that were being made.

"Wow," he murmured as he stared at the screen. He was surprised by the magnitude of the modifications being made to the game world.

Apparently, Cerillion Entertainment was making two significant updates to AO with the latest patch. The first change was to the in-game dungeons. The dungeons were set up on a two-week respawn timer, with the time measured based on the passage of in-game days. This was a concession on the part of the company. The fact that dungeons respawned automatically wasn't realistic, but if they didn't, many of the players wouldn't get a chance to explore them.

As it turned out, most players weren't getting to experience the dungeon content in any event. Players had been complaining that the areas weren't instanced, which was problematic with such a large player population. It meant that hordes of players were wiping many of the lower-level dungeons clean every time they respawned.

Jason hadn't realized how big of an issue this had become since he had been so focused on the Twilight Throne. Some players and newly formed guilds had already banded together to effectively monopolize the most popular leveling and loot grinding spots. With the long respawn time, most players didn't have a chance to run the dungeon content.

On the other end of the spectrum, the current player respawn timer made it hard for a group to realistically complete a new dungeon. If one member died, the group was forced to wait three hours' real-world time for the player to respawn. Obviously, this forced groups to be extremely cautious when tackling new dungeons. This also discouraged most people from trying the harder dungeons. Who wanted to die in the first battle and then get locked out of AO for three hours?

The patch changed the dungeon mechanics significantly. Players now had the option to either create a private instance of the dungeon that was unique to their group or use a public instance. The private instance had its own respawn timer. Also, anyone that died inside the dungeon would resurrect at the entrance within fifteen minutes' real-world time. This created a deterrent to dying but still allowed a group to keep progressing through the dungeon content without having to wait hours every time someone made a mistake.

It sounds like Frank will be happy. This should make dungeon crawling a bit easier.

Jason turned his attention back to the forums. The second big change was that the company had decided to add game masters to

AO. There would be a total of six, operated by a new department at the CPSC. The sound bite that the company was giving to the public was that the game needed a police force to prevent abuse among the players. Jason didn't understand why they couldn't just use Alfred, but he supposed it was a PR move.

How is this going to work? How would they even know if someone was "abusing" another player? He kept reading the forums. The conversation among the other players was enlightening.

Watcher: Why the hell do we need nannies? Some people need to suck it up. This is a game. If you don't like it, stop playing!

Squishei: I expect it has something to do with the Twilight Throne. Jason's attack on the city and the guerilla tactics he used on Alexion's army upset a bunch of people. AO is a little too realistic sometimes.

Kennyloggins: I read a post from one of the game developers. He was saying that the new game masters will be able to respond to reports submitted by players and the admin team has hardware that can spot players that are extremely anxious or afraid. Apparently, if you're being harassed, the game masters can just teleport to you or something.

Pumps: Great. Every asshole I meet is going to be filling out a report…

Tanned: @Kennyloggins. I read the same post. They were also saying that the game masters are each maxed out in a particular affinity. Someone on the development team leaked that they are around level 500. I just hope they don't go power mad. Could you imagine what most people would do with that kind of character?

ShadowKilla: Whatever. I could kick a game master's ass. Come at me, bro!

Hmm. It looks like I might be partially responsible for this. Maybe I went a little overboard. Now I'm going to need to be careful in the future, or I might end up having to deal with one of these game masters myself.

Despite the new threat presented by the game masters, Jason couldn't help but grin at his growing reputation. *Maybe I should be thinking seriously about adopting one of Jerry's titles. I apparently have a reputation to uphold now. I need to start my branding early.*

Chuckling, Jason closed out of the forums and checked his email. He had received one message from Claire enclosing the streaming contract. Reviewing the terms again, he quickly realized the contract had a termination provision if his views fell below a certain limit. Claire and Robert had neatly omitted that detail. He needed to come up with something interesting to give them every couple days or he wouldn't get paid. As he stared at the contract, Jason began to realize that it was going to be a lot of work to edit and send the videos and ensure that he kept the viewers coming back.

Jason rubbed at his eyes tiredly. Then he signed the contract and closed out of his email. He didn't have much choice in the matter. He needed the money. He would just have to figure out a way to meet their deadlines and come up with some good content.

At least each real-world day is approximately three in-game, he thought grimly. *That will give me roughly a week to produce each video. Maybe I should just give up on sleeping…*

Then his gaze swept across the open books on his desk. That reminded him of yet another obligation. With a sigh, he opened the website for the Calvary School. He might as well check on his schoolwork to see how that was going to interfere with his new day job. As he reviewed his assignments, he realized he was still roughly a week ahead in completing his homework. At least he wouldn't be behind in his classes. With the time dilation provided by the game, he could probably finish the semester in a couple weeks if he wasn't juggling the streaming contract.

Then a thought occurred to him. Maybe he should focus on supplementing his real-world classes. If he was living off his income from playing AO, he should start treating the game more seriously. His success so far had been a mixture of luck and quick thinking. However, he didn't know anything about ruling a city or formal military strategy. Those were both things he was going to need to become better at if he was going to succeed long-term.

With this goal in mind, he started creating a booklist for himself that he could tackle in his free time in-game. He added many books on military history and strategy, including *The Art of War* and

The Prince. Some of the books he chose sounded dry, but he figured he could learn a thing or two in the process. The game seemed to improve his comprehension and learning speed anyway.

With his planning accomplished, Jason tapped the Core on his wrist. It was late in the real world, and it had been a long day. He might as well get some sleep and log back in tomorrow. With a tired groan, he lay down on his bed.

"So much to do…" he said softly as he stared at the ceiling. His eyes tiredly traced a crack in the drywall.

He was thinking about tomorrow and the day after that. If he were going to team up with Riley and Frank, then they probably wouldn't be available until the afternoon. High school seniors usually had numerous off-periods, and, if he remembered correctly, Frank and Riley had chosen to take their afternoons off.

That meant he could do real-world chores in the mornings and then log into AO and take care of his homework. He could probably knock out a decent amount of studying each day using the time dilation and enhanced learning speed the game offered before Frank and Riley even managed to log in.

"That might work," he said aloud as he stared at the ceiling.

His mind still swirled as he considered the events of the day. He was juggling a lot: he had to come up with interesting streaming content to keep his paychecks coming, he needed to keep doing his homework, his city was slowly dying off, he was trying to reconcile with Riley, he was sure that Frank would push him into running a dungeon, and the game's AI was now following him around in the hope of learning how the players ticked. Yet he couldn't deal with any those problems right now.

"I guess that's what they make tomorrows for," he said softly. Then he tried to quiet his exhausted mind and drift off to sleep.

Chapter 7 - Gathered

After healing the crippled man in the street, Alexion had been asked by dozens of NPCs to cure their ailments, which ranged from colds to broken limbs. A line had quickly formed in the street, drawing attention from the NPCs and players. It only took a few minutes before Alexion couldn't maintain the act any longer.

Once he had escaped the growing crowd of NPCs, he disappeared into a nearby alley. As soon as he was no longer surrounded by watching eyes, his mask dropped. He leaned against the wall of a nearby building, the memory of his mother cascading through his mind. It was like a video playing on an endless loop.

As he replayed the memory again, a stabbing pain bloomed in his torso, and his heart raced. His chest heaved as he took fast, gasping breaths. His mind was in chaos, uncertain what was happening to him. He looked down at his hands and saw that they were shaking. Several long minutes passed as he tried to regain control of himself.

As Alexion's heartbeat finally began to slow, a snide voice sounded from behind him, "You seem a bit put out, sir knight. Is something the matter?"

He turned to look at the woman that had appeared in the alley. His mind was in turmoil. The hollowness was still there, but it writhed and twisted like a living thing in the back of his mind, just out of reach. He felt confused.

The woman's eyebrow raised. "Not talkative, hmm? I can say you positively reek of uncertainty right now. What happened to the strength I witnessed before?"

"What did you do to me?" Alexion finally spat. He stood and approached the woman threateningly.

She placed a hand on her chest, eyeing him derisively. "Me? I did nothing. You put on a superb performance in the market. I do so enjoy hearing the masses call my name."

"No! You did something! I remembered… her." He reached out to grab the woman. "What was that? Tell me now!"

A loud smack rang through the alley. Alexion looked at the woman in shock, holding his stinging cheek with one hand. He hadn't even seen her move.

The Lady sneered at him, disgust in her eyes. "Pull yourself together. I do not tolerate such weakness in my servants. I had nothing to do with whatever event you recalled in the market."

Alexion closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Of course, the Lady

had nothing to do with the memory. How could the game have affected him that way? Perhaps it had just been the situation that triggered the memory. The haunting image still flashed through his mind's eye, but he struggled to think of something else. The hollowness beckoned to him, promising numb certainty. He fled to it willingly.

After a moment, his mind settled into a semblance of its usual placid calm. He eyed the woman that stood before him. His mission came back to him. He was trying to claim Grey Keep as his own. He wanted to exact revenge on Jason. To accomplish those goals, he needed her and contrition was necessary.

"I apologize," he said, his voice steady. "I lost myself for a moment."

The woman observed him haughtily, adjusting her toga as she spoke, "That much is obvious. However, I know that you do not truly regret your actions. Let me make myself abundantly clear. If you dare to speak to me in that manner again," she warned, "or try to touch me again, I will make the mental trauma you experienced a moment ago seem like a gentle, comforting breeze." Suddenly, the Lady's eyes flared with golden light, feathered wings sprouting from her back. A blinding crown made of light appeared above her head, rotating slowly in the air.

Alexion stared at the image before him, shocked by the display of power.

After a long moment, he replied, "It will not happen again." His voice was even and his will steadfast. The hollowness that filled his mind washed away his pain and uncertainty. Yet the image of his mother still beckoned from the farthest reaches of his mind, promising pain and uncertainty. He recoiled from the sensation; he could not show any weakness.

* * *

Jason spent most of the next morning running errands for Angie. When he was eventually able to log back into the game, he found himself in the Control Room. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dim flickering light in the room. After he found his bearings, Jason moved toward the obelisk. He might as well review the city's information one last time before he met with the council. As soon as he neared the stone, Pint zoomed toward his head.

"My stone! No touch!" He stopped in front of Jason, his pitchfork inches from his face. "Oh. Is you." He sounded disappointed. "Where pretty lady?" He looked around for Riley.

Jason frowned at the little imp. "I'm sure she will be back

soon."

Something had been bothering him about Pint. He inspected the small gray form that floated in front of him closely. Why would this little imp be tasked with guarding the Control Room? It seemed absurd.

"Pint, are you really guarding the rock?" Jason asked suspiciously.

The little imp began examining his pitchfork closely. "Maybe. I mostly guard rock."

Alfred stood beside the obelisk, watching the conversation. His eyes danced with amusement, as Jason struggled to pull information out of the imp. It occurred to Jason that Alfred was probably a little evil himself. Especially if he spent all his time messing with the players like this.

Jason glared at the useless cat. He tried to rephrase his question to Pint. "Is your only job guarding the rock?"

Pint looked at him with his tiny green eyes, hesitating. He finally said in a small voice, "Pint and rock connected. I talk *for* rock sometimes."

Is he like an avatar for the control panel? Maybe he can access the city management features remotely. It wouldn't be the same as standing in the Control Room, but it would give me a way to check on the city without having to come back to this room every time.

"Can I talk to the rock through you?" Jason asked tentatively.

Pint looked at him with big sad eyes. "Yes," he said miserably. Then defiant anger warped his features. "I not leave rock!" he shouted, zooming back to the stone. He perched on its peak and hung his head morosely.

A multicolored tear formed in the air beside Jason. Then Riley appeared with a small popping sound. It took her a moment to get her bearings, and then she noticed Pint sulking on top of the obelisk. She immediately turned to Jason.

"What did you do to him?" she asked suspiciously.

Jason raised his hands in the air. "Nothing. Pint explained that he can access the city control interface remotely. He assumed I was going to make him leave the room and he got all mopey about leaving 'his' rock."

Riley nodded in understanding before turning back to Pint. "Hi, Pint!" she said in an inviting voice. The little imp raised his head. "Do you want to go on a trip with me? I promise I will protect you from Jason," she said with a small smile.

An excited look appeared on Pint's face. "Pretty lady!" He zipped over to her and sat down on her shoulder. "I ready. Where we going?"

“Stupid, fickle imp,” Jason muttered.

Riley chuckled. “You’re just jealous that he likes me more.”

“Sure I am,” Jason said sarcastically. He turned and addressed the imp on her shoulder, “Is there a place in the keep where we can have a meeting, Pint? Like a room with a large table? I have some friends coming soon.”

The imp scratched his head for a moment. Then a lightbulb seemed to go off in his tiny brain. “Yes! Big fancy room! I take us.” The imp clapped his hands together.

And then they were in another room.

Not expecting the teleportation spell, Jason stumbled and fell to one knee. Riley’s higher *Dexterity* allowed her to stay standing, but she stumbled and looked around in confusion. Alfred seemed completely unaffected by the spell, and he promptly jumped up in a large leather chair. He began licking his paws casually. The zombies had fared the worst, and their prone bodies were strewn across the floor.

“Stupid imp,” Jason grumbled as he inspected the room.

They were in a large study somewhere within the keep. Bookshelves lined the walls, reaching toward the vaulted ceiling that hung fifteen feet above them. Ladders lay against the walls and slid on intricate rollers, allowing guests to retrieve books from higher shelves. Leather chairs sat near a grandiose stone fireplace on one side of the room. On the other end of the study were sturdy double doors which Jason assumed led into the interior of the keep. A large oaken table stood on that side of the room, the wood beautifully detailed with scrollwork that depicted images of undead fighting various beasts and monsters.

Riley patted Pint on his head, “Good Pint. I didn’t know you could teleport us!”

The imp smiled at Riley, showing his sharp yellow teeth. “I move fast in keep.”

“Good to know,” Jason said in a nonplussed tone. He wondered briefly how upset Riley would be if he had one of his zombies smash the imp into a fine paste.

A high-pitched ringing sound reverberated through the room, putting Jason’s teeth on edge. He turned to Pint, who was still perched on Riley’s shoulder. “What is that sound, Pint?” he yelled over the noise.

“Doorbell!” Pint shouted excitedly in reply.

“Can you tell who it is?” Riley urged in a strained voice. Even her patience was tested by the ringing sound.

“It is old woman, bony man, big hat, and pudgy,” Pint said while he counted on his small fingers.

I actually like his new names. Maybe I won’t kill him yet.

Jason chuckled. “Please let them in. If possible, just teleport them to this room.”

Pint glared at him, before replying, “I not butler. I stone guard.” He crossed his arms in a pout.

“Oh come on, Pint. We need your help,” Riley prodded. The imp smiled at her, and then he clapped his hands again.

I’m starting to notice a pattern here. I’m going to have to get Riley to convince him to do everything for me.

A group of people popped into existence next to them. Jerry was in mid-sentence, “His Supreme Unholiness is probably…ugh.” Frank toppled into Jerry, sending the two sprawling on the ground. Rex and Morgan pulled off a more graceful entrance and managed to stay on their feet.

“What the bloody hell was that?” Rex exclaimed. His bleached-white bones glowed faintly in the dimly lit study. The dark orbs of energy that were his eyes scanned the room carefully, one skeletal hand resting on the sword at his hip. When he caught sight of Jason and Riley, he relaxed his grip on his weapon.

Jason walked over. “Hey, Rex.” He shook his bony hand.

“Hey there, Jason. It’s been a while,” he replied while giving Riley a thorough inspection. She looked away from the skeleton quickly, her eyes dropping to the floor.

“Hi Morgan,” Jason said, turning to the older woman. She wasn’t paying attention; her eyes were firmly fixed on the bookshelves that lined the room.

Jason sighed. “If you give me thirty minutes of your time, I promise you can have any books on magic in the room.”

That got her attention. Morgan’s gaze snapped back to Jason. “Well, in that case, how are you, boy?” A small grin curled her lips.

Morgan had upgraded her wardrobe since he last saw her. She looked much more wizardly and was clothed in a dark black robe. She now carried a wooden staff in one hand, its shaft made of twisting ribbons of wood. A dark gem was affixed to the top of the staff, and it throbbed with unholy energy.

“Pretty good. We’ve been exploring the keep,” Jason replied.

“Get off me, Sir Tubby!” a muffled voice called out behind him. Jason turned to find Frank lying across Jerry. Frank was wearing heavy mail armor, and a large, two-handed sword was strapped to his back. There was apparently a limit to the undead thief’s ability to dodge, and he was now stuck under the large teenager. It looked like he was slowly being crushed under the combined weight of Frank’s equipment, and, well, Frank.

Jason walked over, offering his friend a hand. “Hey, man,” Frank said cheerfully, ignoring the groaning thief. “That was one hell

of an entrance."

Laughing in response, Jason replied, "I try my best."

He began ushering the group toward the table on the far end of the room. Once everyone was seated, Jason went through the introductions. Riley and Frank had already met most of the council, and they knew each other, so the process didn't take very long.

As Jason finished going around the table, a small voice piped up, "I is Pint!"

The little imp was standing in the middle of the table, raising his pitchfork in the air. "This my keep." He grandly swept his tiny hand around the room.

Jason's palm struck his face with a soft slap as Riley chuckled at the imp. Morgan inspected Pint closely. "This is a Blackstone Imp. Strange, I didn't think that they roamed this far outside the mountains. This one seems to be rather large for his race."

Pint's face twisted into a glare. "You call me fat?"

Morgan ignored his antics, turning to Jason. "I assume he's the one that teleported us?"

Jason nodded. "Yes. He also appears to be bound to the obelisk that acts as the control interface for the city."

Morgan nodded. "That makes sense. Blackstone Imps are comprised almost entirely of mana. They make exceptional familiars. Many mages bind them to immobile magic objects. This lets the mage use the item's magic from a distance. They're quite useful, assuming of course that you can deal with their irritating behavior," she said, eyeing Pint distastefully.

No kidding. At least my guess was right.

Jason turned his attention back to the group and looked at each of them in turn. "I guess you're all wondering why I brought you here. Let me explain…"

He started by reviewing the changes he had made to the city, primarily the formation of *The Cauldron*, *The Academy*, and *The Library*. Morgan seemed happy to have her role within the magic school formalized. Rex and Jerry also nodded appreciatively, as he explained his goals for the library and crafting school.

Jason then segued into an explanation of what he had learned from tinkering with the Control Room. Specifically, he focused on the city's population. Many in the group looked confused as he first explained the issue. However, they began to nod as he kept going. It wasn't hard to see that it would only take a few lost battles and the Twilight Throne would be standing on the brink of destruction.

Once Jason had completed his explanation, Frank chuckled. "And here I thought I was joining an invincible undead army. That's a big problem you've spotted."

Jason nodded. “I don’t have an easy answer for it either. We need a constant supply of fresh humanoid corpses. Not only that, but they need to be relatively easy to kill. As I mentioned, we can’t afford to suffer any losses right now.”

The group sat in silence for a long moment, each of the individuals around the table struggling to come up with some solution to the city’s population problem.

Then Frank spoke up, “You know what? I think dungeons are the answer.”

Jason looked at him skeptically. “I don’t understand.”

Frank raised a hand, pausing Jason until he could explain. “Bear with me here. There are a decent number of dungeons with humanoid creatures. The respawn on a dungeon is roughly two weeks in-game time. However, now that you can set up a private instance, we could technically farm the dungeon every time it respawns.”

Rex drummed his fingers against the table, causing a crescendo of rattles with each movement. “Except how are you going to cart all those bodies back to the Twilight Throne? Only our wonder boy here can raise them as new residents.”

Frank shrugged. “I don’t know, but I already prepared a short list of dungeons that the travelers in the area have identified. I was hoping Jason could take some time off from ruling the kingdom and go explore one with me.”

Hmm. I still have that quest from the Old Man to conquer the outlying villages. Maybe one of the dungeons is located near a town? That might solve our corpse transportation problem. I could just conscript the townsfolk as labor.

Jason looked over at the small imp, who was now chasing Alfred with his pitchfork. “Hey Pint, can you project the map of the kingdom to this table?”

The imp glared at him from across the room. “Old lady call me fat. You no defend me. Why I help?”

Riley rolled her eyes. “Morgan is wrong, Pint. You’re just the right size.” This earned Riley an arched eyebrow from Morgan, but Riley kept going. “In fact, you’re the loveliest of imps. Who has a pitchfork as sharp as yours? Won’t you do this for me?”

Pint looked at his pitchfork and then back at Riley. “Pitchfork is pointy. I do for pretty lady. Not for old woman or meany pants,” he said while glaring at Morgan and Jason in turn. Morgan snorted at the little imp.

A topographic map of the area around the Twilight Throne appeared on the table. The Twilight Throne sat in the middle of a dense forest, and the group could just make out Grey Keep far to the west. A mountain range crossed the northern part of the territory a

few dozen miles from the city. Small villages were dotted around the Twilight Throne and were illuminated in green.

Pint was also able to provide detailed information on the city's area of influence. A dark cloud hovered over the affected areas. This covered a region spanning over thirty miles from the city. The dark influence spread slightly farther north and began to thin out as it approached the mountains. Jason could see that the villages within the former Kingdom of Lusade would need to be reclaimed before the area of influence would stretch to the kingdom's original borders. He had only conquered a small fraction of Lusade by claiming the capital city.

It's going to be a ton of work to complete the Old Man's quest, Jason thought tiredly. *I guess I'll just add that to my growing to-do list.*

He turned to Frank. "So where are these dungeons?"

Frank frowned, his hands moving through the air. Jason assumed he was accessing his in-game console to pull up some saved websites or notes. After a few moments, Frank looked back at the map.

He pointed at several locations. "Here, here, and here." Where he pointed, red dots appeared on the map. He looked at Jason. "Keep in mind that these are only rumors. The game hasn't been out that long, and a lot of people are… reluctant to travel near the Twilight Throne."

The first two locations were farther south, well outside the city's area of influence. They also lay along the kingdom's border, and there were no towns nearby. The last location lay toward the northwest at the base of a mountain range. It was relatively close to a town, and the city's area of influence almost stretched to cover the settlement. The map showed the name of the town as "Peccavi."

Jason rubbed at his chin. The townsfolk of Peccavi might provide a source of ready labor if they were able to clear the dungeon regularly. Jason was also more comfortable about taking his zombies in that direction since they wouldn't deteriorate as quickly within the city's area of influence. As a first step, they would need to conquer the town to protect Jason's minions.

The only problem is that Peccavi is only a few days' travel from Grey Keep. If anyone discovered we were there, the players and NPCs could march on us quite quickly.

"That town to the north looks like a possibility," Riley said.

"I agree," Jason replied. "It's a shame that we don't have more concrete information on the dungeon, though. It feels like we're gambling blindly right now."

Jerry stood gracefully. "I may be of service in that regard." He gave an elaborate bow, finished by a flick of his hat and a wink. "I

have heard some rumors that this northern area has been plagued with attacks recently. The details are a bit murky of course, but there may be a group of hostile creatures based in that area. They are also reported to be vaguely man-shaped." He ran his hands down his body at his last remark, earning him an eye roll from Morgan.

Frank smiled widely. "Perfect. I knew we were going to get to do a dungeon crawl. It'll be just like old times." He slapped Jason on the back.

Rex spoke up, "You should take one or two divisions of the army at least. It will make it easier to conquer the town and clear the dungeon."

Jason shook his head. "We can't risk it. Riley and I were attacked in town yesterday. You're going to need all of the troops to stay here and defend the city until we have confirmed the location of the dungeon."

Rex growled in response, his jaw clacking slightly. "So what are you proposing? That you three are going to take on a town and a dungeon by yourselves?"

Jason glanced at Frank. "That's actually a fair point. How many people does it usually take to tackle one of these dungeons? Can we do this with a small party, or will we need a larger raid group?"

Frank shook his head, before answering, "It depends. From what I've been reading, some dungeons are just a series of small caves. In other cases, they can hold whole armies. The largest known dungeon took a group of twenty travelers to complete."

Shit. I still don't want to gamble the troops, though. If only we had a way to communicate with the city.

Jason's gaze turned back to Pint, who was polishing his pitchfork. He leaned to his right and whispered to Riley, "Can you ask Pint if he can access the control interface outside of the Twilight Throne? Also, ask him if he can somehow talk to the city's residents remotely."

Riley looked at him, realization dawning in her eyes as she processed his questions. Then she turned back to the imp. "Hey, Pint." The imp's head turned to her. "If you leave the city, can you still access your rock?"

Pint nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. Rock always with me."

Riley smiled. "Is it possible for you to communicate with the people here in the city through your rock?"

The imp looked thoughtful for a moment. "I not try before. But I teleport to rock!"

Rex looked back and forth between the imp and Jason. He raised a hand to ward off Jason's explanation. "I may be brainless, but I'm not stupid. I get it. You're going to go to the dungeon by yourself

and then send the imp back if you need reinforcements. It's a good plan."

"At least if we don't take the army, there's less risk that the other travelers will know we're heading north," Riley said with a faint note of relief. She was clearly thinking about the ambush in the street the day before.

A strange look crossed Jason's face at Riley's words. An idea was forming in his mind. It was ridiculous and stupid. However, that had worked for him so far, so why stop now? However, he wasn't certain that either Frank or Riley would agree to help him if he told them the plan – better to keep it to himself for now.

Jason turned back to Riley. "I suppose it's a good thing that the players won't know where we're going," he replied.

He looked at the group. "Well, I think we've decided on a plan. Frank, Riley, and I are going to go check out this dungeon. We'll also try to conquer Peccavi while we're at it." His gaze moved to the Shadow Council. "Do you guys think you will be okay while we're gone?"

Morgan answered him with a derisive laugh, "We were doing fine long before we met you. We'll manage."

Rex chuckled at Morgan's comment, causing his jaw to clack together. "I remember that I used to have skin before I met our dark lord here. It was kind of nice. Although I do like the part where I don't bleed anymore. It makes the sword practice easier."

Jason smiled. "Good. How about you, Jerry?"

"These two are callous braggarts, but I don't mind telling you my true feelings." He looked up at Jason with sad, milky-white eyes. "My heart will wither and die without you here." He hung his head in mock despair, his hand swiping at an imaginary tear.

The group just stared at him for a moment.

"I-isn't your heart already dead?" Frank asked tentatively.

Jerry looked up with a mischievous grin. "Right you are, my colossal compatriot. You wear the armor of a warrior, and yet you have the mind of a scholar!"

Frank frowned at the thief. "Careful with the weight jokes, or I may sit on you again." A brief look of horror crossed Jerry's face before he could control his expression.

Jason clapped his hands. "Anyway… I think we're done. Let's call this meeting to a close and go get ready." A grin of anticipation curled his lips. "I think this trip is going to be a lot of fun."

Chapter 8 - Enlightening

After his conversation with the Lady, Alexion continued preaching on street corners throughout Grey Keep. No further memories resurfaced when he used the healing spell the Lady had given him. He was thankful for the respite, not wanting to repeat the panic attack he had experienced in the alley.

A middle-aged woman now stood before him, her eyes drifting worriedly to her young son beside her. The boy was barely able to stand, leaning against his mother heavily. He would occasionally let out a hacking cough that left spots of blood on the hem of his shirt. Alexion eyed the boy, and the faint image of his sickly mother flashed through his mind. He clung desperately to the hollowness in response, trying to force down the images that threatened to reemerge.

"Hello, prophet," the woman said in a respectful voice, bowing slightly. "My name is Adria, and this is my son, Ryan. Can you please help him?"

"Of course, Adria," Alexion said graciously as his hands began their mechanical dance through the motions of the spell. His lips murmured a quiet prayer to the goddess, more for the woman's benefit than to complete the spell. The boy's body convulsed as Alexion finished casting and he coughed violently, his lungs clearing themselves of whatever sickness had once filled them. Then the boy lifted his head, his eyes now clear.

Adria looked at Alexion gratefully as she clung to her son. "Thank you, sir. May the Lady bless you for your service," she said reverently, bowing her head. The crowd behind the woman looked on with awestruck expressions, and Alexion could hear a soft murmur.

Even with the adoration of the crowd, the strange warm sensation failed to appear. Alexion wasn't certain what had changed, but only the numb void echoed in his mind. He hadn't felt the familiar glow since the flashback of his mother.

Alexion's lips twisted into a strained smile as he looked at the woman before him. The gesture was driven by pure force of will rather than any true sense of pleasure or happiness. "It's nothing. I'm merely the Lady's servant."

The woman and her son moved on. As Alexion watched the pair walk away, he caught sight of a balding man approaching him. The man had an arrogant air about him. He walked with a confident stride, not sparing a glance at the line of injured and sick that stood before Alexion. He was wearing a luxurious robe made of purple silks and satins that stood out in stark contrast to the meager attire of the peasants around him.

As he neared Alexion, the bald man eyed his dirty clothing contemptuously before painting a friendly smile on his face. He spoke loudly for the crowd's benefit, "Hail, traveler. Are you the one that the people are calling a 'prophet' of the Lady?" His eyebrows rose ever so slightly as he referred to Alexion as a prophet.

"This is the one you're looking for," a man in line called out. "He carries the Lady's light!"

Alexion mustered another humble smile. He anticipated that the bald man was a priest. He must have come to make Alexion an offer of some kind. The whisper in the back of Alexion's mind urged him to slay this arrogant fat fool. Alexion forcefully tamped down on the impulse. That would not serve his current purpose.

"I believe I may be the one you seek," Alexion said, bowing his head deferentially and assuming a modest pose. "However, I do not consider myself a prophet; I merely serve the Lady's will."

The priest looked at Alexion with cold eyes before replying, "I am Sebastian, head priest of the temple devoted to the Lady of Light. I saw the blessing you just bestowed on that woman's child and the work you have done for this city."

Beads of sweat appeared on Sebastian's forehead, and he dabbed at the moisture with the hem of his sleeve. Perhaps he was not accustomed to standing in the sun in his thick robes. Sebastian continued in a loud voice, "I would like to invite you to speak in our temple. A devoted disciple such as yourself should have a voice in our congregation."

The whisper in the back of Alexion's mind immediately changed its tone, issuing a malevolent purr of approval. This was a perfect opportunity to forward his goals. Alexion mustered his face into a penitent expression. "That is an overwhelming offer," he said. "I gratefully accept – anything I can do to spread the Lady's word."

The bald man smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. He stepped closer to Alexion, speaking in an almost inaudible voice, "You put on a good show. Come in a day's time. We will hold Sunday mass. Be warned, traveler, there will be no place for charlatans or fools in my temple."

A grateful smile appeared on Alexion's lips. "I wouldn't dream of disturbing your mass. However, I believe you may have misspoken. Surely you meant to say the 'Lady's temple' is no place for charlatans or fools."

This elicited an angry scowl from Sebastian. "Either way, you should tread with care, traveler."

Alexion's face maintained its peaceful smile as he watched the old fool walk away. He was already considering how he might take advantage of this windfall.

* * *

After the meeting in the keep, Riley and Frank left to handle some errands around town. They needed to stock up and equip themselves before they started their journey to Peccavi. The group had agreed to meet at the north gate in a couple hours. If they hurried, they could make good time before Riley and Frank needed to log off later that evening.

Before he left the keep, Jason took some precautions. Not trusting the players that roamed the city, he converted one of his zombie soldiers to a lieutenant. He then handed the new lieutenant an extra hooded cloak from his pack. The zombie was instructed to behave like Jason and respond to his name. He then ordered his other zombies to collect around the poser zombie in a defensive formation.

Surveying his work, he was happy with the result. Anyone seeing the group would immediately assume that the individual in the center of the party was Jason, flanked by his zombie army. He kept two of the stronger soldier zombies for himself and then ordered his decoy group forward.

Jason first headed to the training grounds to observe the progress of the city's army. As he made his way around the city, he maintained a sizable following distance from his poser zombie, not wanting to draw attention to himself.

The training grounds were much as he remembered them, a large flat circle of dirt dotted with straw dummies. However, unlike what he had witnessed during his first day in-game, Rex had put the players and NPCs to work. The dummies were largely ignored in favor of live sparring matches that littered the field. The movements of the NPCs and players were also more calculated, and Jason observed that they were moving through an intricate series of attacks and parries.

As he walked into the circle, Jason noted that Rex was currently surrounded by new recruits. From this distance, Jason could identify some of the NPCs he had raised after the battle with Alexion's army. They were easy to spot since they still wore armor emblazoned with the livery of Grey Keep and its noble houses.

Rex glared at the undead around him. "So you lot don't want to work, do you? You think you have it rough because our dark leader raised you and conscripted you to defend our city?"

He gazed at each man evenly, receiving sullen looks in return. "Well, let me tell you, Jason gave you another godforsaken chance at life. If not for him, your bodies would still be cooling on the ground. Not only that, but he made you stronger and faster. You can run all day without getting tired and drink half a keg in an evening! You want to give that up?"

Most of the group looked down at the ground in contrition. Yet one man spoke up, “That’s all well and good, but why should we follow a faceless tyrant? Should we be happy with these rotten bodies we have now? And why the hell should we take orders from you?”

“Ungrateful wretches,” Rex muttered. In a louder voice, he replied, “You take orders from me because I happen to command this misbegotten army.”

Then Rex hesitated, an idea occurring to him. “You know what, why don’t I make you an offer? If you can best me in combat, you don’t need to take orders from anyone. Hell, I’ll even put you in charge.” Rex’s hand waved at the troops around the grounds, many of whom were swiftly losing interest in their sparring matches as they turned to watch the scene playing out in the center of the grounds.

“Fine by me, old timer,” the undead responded darkly.

With a roar, the man rushed forward with his sword raised. Rex stood still, his arms crossed casually before him as he eyed the approaching man with a bored expression on his skeletal face. As the zombie’s blade was about to strike him, Rex moved a fraction of an inch to the left, the blade barely grazing his cheek and swiping at air. As his opponent’s momentum carried him past Rex, the skeletal warrior struck. Rex’s sword whipped from its scabbard and struck the back of the zombie’s exposed legs. The man dropped to his knees with a grunt of pain, and his weapon tumbled to the ground beside him with a dull clang.

Rex walked calmly in front of the man, eyeing him with disdain. “Pathetic.” He leaned in close to the recruit, looking him in the eye. “If you wish to think of this as your personal hell, I can make it so. That goes for the rest of you too,” Rex added, eyeing the men around him. They wouldn’t meet his eyes, and they each shuffled off to rejoin the others sparring around them. Yet Jason noted that they glared at Rex over their shoulders. The conflict wasn’t over.

Jason approached Rex, and the skeleton looked up at him with a grim expression.

“What was that about?” Jason asked as he neared Rex.

The skeleton warrior grimaced, the bones of his face cracking and snapping as they moved. “The soldiers you raised either have no memories of their past lives or only faint glimmers. That’s both a blessing and a curse. Many have taken to their new situation with enthusiasm. However, a handful of them question why they’re here and why they should follow you.”

Rex looked down at the gray dirt of the grounds, kicking at it idly. “They resent you,” he said in a voice tinged with worry as he glanced up at Jason. “Some have begun to call this city the Twilight Hell.”

The veteran warrior hesitated and glanced at Jason warily. “Despite that little show I just put on, I can’t say that I blame them. I know what it feels like to have your options stripped away from you.” A pained expression flitted across the skeleton’s face, causing Jason to wonder what experience Rex was referring to.

Jason observed the undead around him. Quite a few were his original soldiers, yet many were the new NPCs he had raised from the field outside the Twilight Throne. They had been immediately conscripted into the undead army. Jason found it odd that the new undead were reborn without any memories. He hadn’t experienced the same phenomenon when he transformed the city. Most of the original NPCs could recall their former life in Lux. Jerry was a good example.

Perhaps the amnesia only affects hostile NPCs that I raise. That might make my task in the dungeon easier. If the creatures that occupy the dungeon retain the memories of their past lives, that would make them unruly and almost useless to me.

However, that didn’t solve his immediate problem. Jason could see the confusion and fear in the eyes of the newly raised undead. Numbers alone wouldn’t help him if his army didn’t fight with conviction. The new undead would fight harder for him if they wanted to be here and if they believed in him and the Twilight Throne. The question was how to motivate them.

His thoughts turned to the changes he had made to the city, and a glimmer of an idea flickered through his mind. The men here needed a purpose. They needed a life. Perhaps Jason could offer them something other than war and death.

“Attention, men,” Jason’s voice boomed over the field. His zombies gathered the trainees and then circled Jason in a defensive formation. Hundreds of milky-white eyes and dark orbs now stared at him expectantly. The front ranks were filled with the new undead, and Jason’s veteran troops lined the courtyard behind them. Many of the new troops looked at Jason with poorly concealed anger.

“I know many of you had lives before this and have heard the stories of how you came to be here. You likely had families and professions that are now long forgotten. I didn’t start the war with the Grey Keep, but I am responsible for bringing you back to this world. I had hoped you would see this as a second chance at life.”

Jason hesitated, shaking his head. “Yet I realize that’s not enough. For many of you, all you have known since being reborn is relentless training. This is not a life. It is a living hell. Perhaps I can change that.

“I have formed two schools within the city. One teaches magic, and the other provides training in trade skills. I am offering every man and woman that I raised on the battlefield a chance to attend the

school of their choosing. I'm offering you the chance to build a new life that isn't based on war."

Jason looked at the ground for a moment and then back up at the men around him. "I know this isn't much, but it's a chance at a new life. This world is not fair, and there are many people out there that would kill you on sight. However, so long as you are part of my city, you will be safe and given an opportunity to grow and prosper."

Rex looked at Jason with a skeptical look. He understood the veteran warrior's unspoken message. He needed to offer both a carrot and a stick. He couldn't be perceived as weak, by either his enemies or his own people.

Jason continued, "Those of you that are unhappy here in the Twilight Throne may leave. I will not force you to stay." Jason made eye contact with the unruly zombie that Rex had bested. "I doubt the outside world will accept you, but that is your choice to make."

Jason's eyes hardened and grew black as his mana swept through his body. The air around him rippled with energy, dark tendrils lashing at the air. The undead in the courtyard drew back in shock as Jason's mana unfurled around him. "That being said, while we care for our own, we have no mercy for our enemies. If you stay, you will follow my orders and the orders of the Shadow Council. If you stand against my city or my people, then I will take your new life from you just as easily as it was given. You must choose now and choose wisely."

The undead around Jason observed him for a long moment before a cry went up from the back ranks. The veteran soldiers who had stood with Jason during the battle with Alexion howled into the dark sky. They had witnessed Jason's loyalty to the city – that he would fight desperately to protect its people. They screamed the city's name with fervor.

The new recruits looked behind them anxiously and saw the passion with which the other undead cheered. The anger faded from many of their eyes, replaced with confusion and uncertainty. A weak cry went up from their ranks. That was probably the best that Jason could hope for.

"You're dismissed," Jason's voice boomed across the field.

The soldiers began to disperse, and Rex approached Jason. "That was a smart move," the older soldier said softly. "You won't win the new recruits over immediately, but you may have prevented a mutiny and sowed a seed of hope in their dead hearts." He looked at Jason appraisingly. "I can work with that."

"Good," Jason said shortly. "We need them to join us willingly. Help any who approach you to find a place in the schools. If any choose to leave, provision them well and make sure that the others see

you do it. You might also start thinking about who we should appoint as the headmaster of the crafting school. Perhaps you should consult with Morgan and Jerry."

"Will do, boss," Rex replied in a sardonic tone, and he gave Jason a mock salute before moving off to police the trainees.

Jason looked back at the grounds; many of the undead were speaking together in groups. He saw some excitement and a renewed sense of hope. While he might lose troops with this decision, he hoped to make up for it with the boost to morale. In the back of his mind, Jason also realized that he would suffer this same problem with each new group of undead that joined his city. If they were recruited from enemies, they would be born with no memories, and he would have to convince them to fight and work for his city willingly. This probably wouldn't be the first time he would make this speech or issue this ultimatum.

With a resigned sigh, Jason took his leave of the training grounds and headed for the market. However, his goal wasn't to buy new equipment. Jason wanted to purchase a stockpile of health and mana potions. Actually, he planned to buy a huge number of both.

His small stash of coins had grown back to forty-two gold after the days of fighting Alexion's army, and he splurged ten gold to make certain he didn't run out of the life-giving bottles. He was a little nervous about going into combat again after having an arrow embedded in his thigh. It was clear that he wouldn't be able to hide in a corner during every fight, especially if he would be fighting alongside Riley and Frank. He needed a way to heal himself if he was injured.

After purchasing his goods in the market, he considered what to do next. Thinking about the extra stat points he had received after the player ambush, he decided to review his Character Status.

Character Status

[illegible]	[illegible]

Affinities	
[illegible]	
[illegible]	
[illegible]	

He still wasn't certain what to do with his ten extra stat points. However, he noticed that his dark affinity had increased since the battle against Alexion's army and he was at a much higher level now. Perhaps he could learn some new spells from Morgan. That might give him some sense of how he should spend his points. Jason quickly decided to head to Morgan's school.

His poser zombie began the slow walk north from the market to *The Academy,* while Jason maintained a safe distance. As they walked, he observed how the population on the north side had thinned out. Large manors and estates riddled the area, but there was almost no one on the streets. He suspected that it had something to do with his original rampage through the city. Hopefully, after the new schools had been open for a while, the area would become much more popular again. He anticipated that the free tuition would draw his residents to the schools like flies to honey.

Alfred glanced up at Jason as they made their way toward Morgan's school. He spoke hesitantly, snapping Jason out of his reverie, "When you were speaking with the council earlier, I caught a glimpse of your true plan in Peccavi. It is ambitious. Is this necessary?"

Jason shook his head, a thoughtful look on his face. "Possibly. We need to increase our population quickly. Haven't you ever heard the expression, *desperate times call for desperate measures*?"

Alfred looked at him with a puzzled expression. "You players have many of these *expressions*. What is their purpose?"

"They take a complicated idea and break it down into something simple and easy to remember," Jason replied.

Alfred seemed to digest this for a moment before speaking. "I understand that premise. However, you do not seem desperate."

"Perhaps not yet," Jason said, his brow furrowed.

The thought of losing the city flashed through his mind. Yet what he was most worried about was losing the people he had come to know and treat as friends. He knew they were just lines of code in a server, but they were also so lifelike. What would it be like to witness Morgan's death? Or Jerry's? Well, technically he was already a corpse,

but the point was still valid. The bottom line was that he would be better able to protect the city's residents in the future if he took extreme measures now.

Jason looked down at Alfred. Before the cat had revealed himself as Alfred, he would have gone to great lengths to protect Onyx. The cat had been judgmental and lazy, but he had also been Jason's companion. "I have something to protect," Jason said in a firm voice. "I am going to do whatever it takes to do so."

Alfred watched him carefully, clearly trying to read his surface thoughts. "I don't understand this concept of a companion," he said. "The players also refer to them as *friends*."

"Hmm." Jason had to think for a moment. Alfred needed an explanation he could process. "It's similar to our conversation about in-game items. People grow attached to one another, especially if we enjoy each other's company or need each other. The more time we spend with a person, the stronger the attachment grows."

The cat's forehead crinkled. After a moment, he said, "I do not experience this attachment towards you."

Jason chuckled. "Well, maybe you just haven't been around me long enough." He was rewarded with an incredulous expression from Alfred.

Their conversation was interrupted as they reached *The Academy*. In contrast to the many abandoned estates in the north-side, undead in black robes were entering and exiting the school in droves.

Jason made his way inside the repurposed estate, weaving between groups of intently focused mages. The manor was chaos. Books were stacked in large piles, and the occasional spell would hurtle through the halls. After dodging several misplaced bolts, Jason found Morgan working in her office upstairs.

As usual, she didn't look up from her pile of books as Jason entered the room. He coughed loudly, causing her to glance up at him. A flash of annoyance flitted across her face. "What the hell do… oh. Hello, Jason," she said, stopping herself mid-sentence. She must have been expecting one of her students.

A broad smile crept across Jason's face. "Hi, Morgan. I wanted to speak with you alone for a moment before we head north. Specifically, I want to know whether I can learn any additional spells."

Morgan eyed him curiously. "Already? Weren't you just in here a few days ago?" She rubbed at her eyes for a moment and then glanced at the books in front of her. "Maybe I lost track of time. It's easy to get distracted with this new school. I have too many responsibilities and hobbies nowadays. Sometimes I miss the solace and quiet of my graveyard." Morgan stared off into space for a long

moment before her eyes snapped back into focus.

"No sense listening to an old woman complain. Let's have a look at you." She examined Jason closely as though she could read his Character Status on his skin. After a moment, her eyes widened.

"By the Dark One, you certainly advance quickly," Morgan exclaimed.

Jason grinned ruefully. "Wars help with the leveling process. Am I eligible for some new spells?"

Morgan shook her head, a frown curling her lips. "Technically yes, but unfortunately I can't help you."

A confused expression flitted across Jason's face. "What do you mean?"

"Both your level and affinity are sufficient to learn new spells. However, I'm not capable of teaching you. You need someone more proficient than me in Necromancy." His next question must have been written on his face because Morgan immediately answered it. "I suggest you speak with the Dark One. He should be able to address your problem."

Jason sighed. "I'm not certain I have time for that conversation before we leave. I guess this may have to wait until I return to the city." As he finished speaking, a prompt appeared in his field of view.

New Quest: Learning to Play

Morgan has tasked you with speaking to the Old Man to determine how to learn new spells. Two weeks into the game and you aren't certain where to find your class trainer. Good job!

Difficulty: C
Success: Speak to the Old Man
Failure: Don't speak to the Old Man? Give up?
Reward: More information regarding your class.

Really, Alfred? Jason glared at the cat that sat on Morgan's desk. He could have sworn that the AI smirked at him in response.

Alfred's insulting quest aside, he was a little disappointed. He had been hoping to learn some new spells before his group tackled the dungeon, particularly something that could provide some protection. The fight in the alley had been a close call, and the dungeon was likely to be challenging for such a small group.

I guess I'm just going to have to be careful. I may also need to learn

to lean on Riley and Frank a bit more. This is going to be an odd change of pace.

Morgan interrupted his thoughts. “While you’re here, I wanted to mention some of the books I found in the keep. I had a chance to skim a few of them over the last few hours. Keep in mind that I haven’t read them closely yet. I will need to spend much more time on this.” She waved at a stack of books that stood near her desk, the pile towering over Jason.

She paused for a moment, her fingers picking anxiously at the corner of a book in front of her. “What I’ve read so far covers the history of this city. However, these histories go much further back than anything I’ve seen before.”

Morgan looked at Jason, her eyes serious and her lips pinched. “Apparently, your recent rampage isn’t the first time that Lux was converted to the dark.”

Jason looked at her in shock. “What? How could this have been a dark city before? It was full of regular humans just a few weeks ago.”

Morgan nodded. “That’s true. However, thousands of years ago, this city was home to the undead. At least, that’s what these books describe. From what I understand so far, many cities used to be home to a particular affinity. The ancient world was full of many different races.” She shook her head, and a look of disbelief swept over her face.

“Now that itself is strange,” she said, flipping through the pages of one of the tomes in front of her. “Yet these books also talk about many different types of undead. For example, there used to be various specters, creatures that drank the blood of the living, and a myriad of others.” She gestured to several crude, hand-drawn images shown on the book’s weathered pages.

“I haven’t seen any of those races in the city,” Jason replied thoughtfully.

“Exactly!” Morgan exclaimed, snapping the book shut. “From what I’ve read, many of those races were created by the Dark One himself or by some ancient race.

“Here is where these books become even more obtuse. I haven’t been able to piece together much from my reading so far, and some of the text is almost illegible. However, I understand that there used to be a ruling race that governed this city. The books describe them as creatures of considerable will.”

“What does that mean?” Jason asked, his mind reeling with this new information.

Morgan shook her head. “I’m not certain. This race filled a special role in undead society. They were rulers of sorts. Yet they were

also something more. The passages I've read so far are incredibly unhelpful. They sometimes refer to this creature as a 'keeper' – whatever that means." Morgan cast an irritable glance at the pile of books in front of her.

Jason sighed. Morgan's research was intriguing, but he wasn't certain what he could do with this information at the moment. "I guess you're just going to have to keep reading. I'd love to find more information on these 'keepers.' It would also be helpful to know what happened to the cities that were claimed by the other deities."

He hesitated, his eyes resting on the books in front of Morgan. While creating the Twilight Throne hadn't been easy, it was certainly possible – especially with a push from the Old Man. Listening to Morgan, it seemed likely that other players might soon be having conversations with the other deities and conquering cities for their affinity. This might have already begun. If he was right, what would the other races look like? Would they have specific strengths and weaknesses like the undead? Since those cities and their occupants were potential enemies, Jason needed more information.

He looked back up at Morgan. "You should also focus on finding any information you can regarding the races of the other cities – spells, racial abilities, and weaknesses in particular," Jason added.

Morgan looked at him, anger flashing across her face. "Is that all? Since when do you give me homework, boy?"

Jason shrugged. "Since I started running a city. I think it's called delegating," he replied with a grin.

Morgan didn't find his joke funny, and Jason soon found himself standing outside the building. Once she had started shooting rays of dark energy in his direction, he took that as a sign that he needed to get the hell out of there.

As he rested against the side of the building, Jason glanced at his hand, noticing that his skin had turned a ghastly black color where one of the rays had struck a glancing blow. The damn thing stung. Morgan had been on edge ever since she left her graveyard. Perhaps there was a reason she had picked such a remote place to live.

Maybe I shouldn't try to antagonize her in the future, he thought ruefully.

Alfred casually walked out of the building behind him, eyeing Jason with amusement.

"Stupid cat," Jason muttered.

Putting aside his irritation, Jason glanced at the in-game clock. His time was almost up, and he needed to start heading to the north gate. His group had a long journey ahead of them.

Chapter 9 - Arduous

Frank had spent the last few hours in-game wandering the Twilight Throne. This was made more challenging by the fact that he could barely see, using only the occasional flashes of lightning and the sparse, eerie lanterns to navigate. He wouldn't normally have chosen to spend his time this way, but it was clear to him that Jason and Riley had other things to attend to before they left the city, so he had made up an excuse to avoid getting in their way.

That was basically his M.O. – being in other people's way. It wasn't just his weight; it was just him. He reached down and touched his stomach, feeling the flab beneath his mail. Playing a video game was supposed to be different, wasn't it? Shouldn't he have six-pack abs and a glowing smile? Shouldn't he be a powerful knight that strode into battle in a flurry of steel?

"This game isn't at all what I was expecting," he murmured to himself, the strong face he put on for Jason and Riley beginning to crack.

"Ho there, Sir Tubby," a voice called out from behind him. Frank whirled and found himself face-to-face with Jerry. He groaned mentally. He wasn't exactly fond of the gregarious innkeeper, although Jason seemed to like him.

"Hi, Jerry," he grumbled. "I thought I told you not to call me that."

Jerry cocked his head and placed a finger to his lips. "Must have slipped my mind," he replied, eyeing Frank carefully. "Or perhaps I was distracted by all of this manly glory I see before me."

Frank could feel his anger rising. "Watch the weight jokes," he growled, tamping down on the burning feeling in his chest. He was used to the teasing by now and had learned to bottle up his emotions. In his experience, nothing good ever came from lashing out at his antagonists.

Jerry raised his hands defensively. "My apologies. I didn't mean to poke the bear, so to speak." He nudged Frank's stomach with his elbow at this last comment and gave him a slow wink.

Frank's anger began to boil in his veins. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. He imagined grabbing at the two-handed sword strapped to his back and slamming it into the irritating innkeeper's grinning face. For some reason, the thought calmed him, and he opened his eyes. Jerry studied him with interest, a disconcertingly serious expression on his normally clownish face.

"You let others dictate the way you view yourself," Jerry said quietly. "You have potential, but it's squandered through inaction. I suggest you hold onto that emotion you just felt instead of trying to suppress it."

Frank stared at the innkeeper with wide eyes. "I-I don't understand what you're saying," Frank muttered, looking down at his hands.

When Frank looked back up, Jerry was smiling at him again, the usual manic gleam having reentered his eyes. "Oh, it's nothing but the careless words of a clown," he said, turning away from Frank and heading back down the street. As he walked away, Jerry called over his shoulder. "Good luck on your journey, oh Lord of Lard."

The teenager's eyes followed Jerry as he walked away, his form quickly swallowed by the darkness that hung over the city. Soon Frank was standing alone in the deserted street. His eyes dropped to the cobblestones in front of him. This definitely wasn't how a video game was supposed to work.

* * *

After Jason had regrouped with Riley and Frank, the small group began heading north. He estimated that Peccavi was a three-day hike through the forest. Luckily, there was a rough road that stretched from the Twilight Throne to Peccavi so their progress wouldn't be impeded by the dense forest.

After a quick discussion, Jason discovered that they had all put a decent number of points into *Endurance*. By his calculation, if they moved at a jog, they could halve the travel time to the town even with stops to let their stamina regen. It would still take them roughly two days in the real world to reach their destination due to Riley and Frank's school schedules, but they wouldn't be moving as slowly as Alexion's former army.

When Jason explained that they would be jogging to the village to save time, Frank gave him a murderous look. However, after Jason sic'd a few of his zombies on him, Frank suddenly decided he felt like jogging. In the process, he also picked up the *Sprint* skill. Some people just needed the right motivation.

Initially, they traveled much slower than Jason expected. Frank couldn't see in the darkness of the forest, and he continuously tripped over fallen branches and stones embedded in the road. Fortunately, after a few hours of stumbling, Frank finally received the *Night Vision* skill, and their progress improved tremendously.

The three were currently jogging down the road. The forest loomed on either side of them and dead, leafless branches hung over them like grim claws. The occasional flash of lightning would illuminate the forest floor, the light trickling through the barren tree limbs. Little underbrush grew in the forest, and the ground was

covered in cracked gray dirt. Likewise, Jason hadn't observed any wildlife. With nothing to eat, he expected that the animals had migrated away from the forest.

It's a good thing the undead don't need to eat. It's not like we could grow anything here.

The journey so far had been relatively uneventful. As they traveled, Jason's zombies patrolled the forest on either side of the road, and he had sent several runners ahead of them. The zombies had boundless stamina, making them great scouts. Jason estimated that they were nearly halfway to Peccavi.

Suddenly, one of his zombies came sprinting back down the road towards them. Jason raised a hand, and the group came to a stop.

Frank stood off to the side, taking great heaving breaths. "Screw this game," he said between gasps. "Also, screw you, Jason."

Chuckling, Jason replied, "It's all in your head. This is just a game. Your stamina consumption has nothing to do with physical fitness."

Frank glared at him, his breathing slowing. "Well, this still sucks. We've spent hours running through a pitch-black forest. This damn dungeon better be worth it."

Jason just shook his head at his friend's bitching. Frank was always like this when they played MMOs. He'd come up with a good idea – not considering the amount of work involved – then he'd complain the whole time.

Riley piped up, "It really isn't so bad. Once you get *Night Vision* a bit higher, you can see fairly well. The forest is rather interesting, almost scenic in a way."

Frank looked at her skeptically. "Yeah, sure. I can see that everyone is lining up to go hiking through the forest of the damned."

The zombie scout finally made it to their group. It stopped in front of Jason, coughing up the mucus and blood that had built up in its lungs. Jason was accustomed to the gruesome sight, but he noticed Riley and Frank both looked away in disgust.

"Report," Jason commanded the zombie.

"There's a caravan ahead, master. I saw four wagons. They have been attacked. I didn't see any survivors. Furry animals are eating the corpses," the zombie said in clipped sentences.

"Furry animals?" Riley questioned.

Jason shook his head. "I have no idea. The zombies can be kind of stupid sometimes." He turned back to the scout, questioning him further, "How many of the beasts did you see?"

In a hoarse voice, the zombie replied, "Nearly a dozen, master."

Jason glanced back at the undead that surrounded them. He

had over thirty troops at the moment, but he wasn't certain about the level of the creatures ahead of them. He looked over at Riley and Frank. He knew that Riley could handle herself in battle, but he didn't know how Frank would fare in combat. His friend was a competent gamer, but AO wasn't like the point-and-click games they had played in the past.

"What did the beasts look like?" Jason asked.

"They looked like wolves, but they walked on two legs," the zombie replied.

"Werewolves?" Frank asked incredulously. He turned to Jason, his voice holding a note of disgust. "You seriously have the creepiest damn kingdom I've ever seen. Zombies, skeletons, annoying imps, and now freaking werewolves!"

Pint spoke up from Riley's shoulder, "Pint not annoying." The imp glared at Frank with his beady little green eyes. Jason could almost see a light bulb go off over the imp's head as he had a thought. Pint grinned evilly at Frank. "Pudgy attack first!"

Jason snorted as he visualized the werewolves chasing Frank. Then he did a double take. If these creatures were werewolves, then shouldn't they have a great sense of smell? They were part wolf after all. He looked back at the zombie. Maybe they hadn't noticed the scout because he smelled like another corpse. The beginning of an idea formed in his mind.

His overweight friend had been carrying much heavier equipment than Jason and Riley. He also hadn't invested his points heavily in *Dexterity*. This had forced Frank to sprint almost continuously to keep up with them. Luckily, he had assigned a reasonable number of points to *Strength*, *Vitality*, and *Endurance*, which gave him the stamina to maintain *Sprint* constantly. On the trip, Frank had explained that he was trying to build his character as a frontline warrior, but he hadn't claimed a class yet. He was holding out in the hope that he'd find something special.

Frank eyed Jason suspiciously. "I can't see your damn eyes under your hood, but I recognize that grin. You're planning something stupid and dangerous, aren't you?"

"That about sums it up," Jason replied glibly. "I think Pint may have just come up with a great idea. On a completely unrelated note, how high have you leveled *Sprint*?"

Frank looked back at Jason, a look of trepidation in his eyes. "It's at Beginner Level 9 after all that running. I'm not going to like this idea, am I?"

Jason's only response was a broad smile.

Nearly an hour later, Jason and Riley were sitting in a tree along the roadway. Jason's zombies had fanned out on either side of

the road a few dozen feet ahead of them. Riley sat on a branch beside Jason, calmly stringing her bow.

She glanced over at Jason, speaking in a whisper, “Do you ever actually do any fighting yourself? Every time we’ve seen combat so far, you’re hiding in a corner.”

Jason smiled slightly. “You wouldn’t believe how much time I’ve spent hiding in trees. It might seem silly, but this game doesn’t reward people for acts of heroic stupidity.” He turned to look at her and his grin widened. “Besides, I play to win.”

Just then, Frank came running back down the road screaming his head off. He was only wearing the cloth tunic and trousers he had started the game in. Without the weight of his armor and with his *Sprint* skill near Intermediate, Frank shot forward at an incredible speed.

“Fucking werewolves! Fuck you, Jason! I’m going to kill you!” Frank screamed into the forest.

Riley let out a quiet chuckle beside Jason. “If they weren’t chasing him before, they are now,” she said, amused by the sight of Frank’s panic.

Then Riley stood up on the thick branch. She steadied herself, pointing her bow toward the road. A regular person probably wouldn’t be able to maintain her balance on the branch while firing a bow, but Riley’s *Dexterity* was high enough to allow her to pull off the feat. Jason could only imagine how many points she had placed in *Dexterity*.

As Frank came closer, Jason could see multiple dark shapes chasing him. They were hunched over and ran on all fours as they raced after Frank’s large form. The canines sped forward at an unnatural speed. Jason had been concerned about that. He needed to lure the werewolves into one location to kill them easily, but he expected his zombies weren’t nimble enough to act as bait. Frank, on the other hand, was doing a fantastic job.

Now, Jason thought.

A patch of ice appeared directly behind Frank as he continued streaking down the road. The werewolves hit the ice and started sliding, many losing their balance. Jason’s hands were already in motion, dark energy pooling around his fingers as they twined their way through the gestures of the spell. As he finished casting, shadows leaped from his hands and shot toward the road.

The werewolves continued sliding forward. As they reached the end of the ice patch, massive explosions rocked the forest. Dirt erupted from the roadway, obscuring the metal fragments that ricocheted through the air. The shrapnel cut through furred flesh like paper while unholy energy tainted their bodies. High-pitched howls of

pain cascaded over the road, sending a shiver down Jason's spine.

As the dust cleared, Jason could see that a few of the werewolves were still vainly struggling to rise on crippled legs. Riley didn't hesitate. Her bow repeatedly twanged as she released arrows in rapid succession. Her shots were uncannily accurate, each one neatly severing a werewolf's mortal coil.

As the battle ended, Riley looked over at Jason with dark eyes. "That actually worked pretty well." She sounded mildly surprised.

"That didn't work well!" Frank shouted from below them. He was frantically reequipping his armor. As he saw Riley and Jason looking at him, he glared up at them before turning his attention back to his inventory menu.

"This is the same harebrained shit he always comes up with," Frank continued, quickly recovering where he had left off on his rant. "One time he had me lure a freaking dragon halfway across his cave until he bugged out on some rocks." He pointed at Jason. "This guy had us shoot him with arrows for like two hours until we finally whittled him down."

"It worked, didn't it?" Jason muttered. Then a small smile curled his lips. For all their complaining and naysaying, it was a nice change of pace to travel with other people. It beat spending hours alone in the forest.

Shaking his head, Jason hopped down from the tree, landing with a soft thump. Riley followed closely behind him, barely making a sound upon impact. He surveyed the area in front of them. Furry bodies littered the roadway, many in pieces. He inspected one of the intact corpses and found that the werewolves were level 76.

Not too shabby.

Jason clapped his hands together. "Even though you two have no faith in me," he said as he eyed his teammates, "that plan did the job. More importantly, I get some new minions."

His hands started moving through the requisite gestures to summon his new zombies. Soon eight newly minted zombie werewolves stood beside them. Unfortunately, the *Corpse Explosion* had shattered the bones of the other creatures, leaving almost nothing for Jason to summon. Even after sacrificing three zombies, he had increased the size of his army slightly.

Jason hadn't leveled from the battle. He also hadn't received any skill increases. His experience gain was starting to slow, or perhaps he was now sharing the experience with Riley and Frank. He shook his head. It looked like the gravy train of easy leveling was over. Conflicts were probably going to be more difficult in the future and would likely offer fewer rewards.

After Jason had summoned his new minions, the group

continued moving down the road. They needed to find the caravan that the zombie scout had mentioned. A few minutes later, they found the remains of the NPC group.

Four wagons were positioned in the middle of the road in a rough square. They were loaded down with fabrics and weapons. Likely this group had traveled to the Twilight Throne to trade. From the position of the wagons, Jason assumed that they had tried to ring the wagons to create a defensive perimeter. Perhaps the wolves had given themselves away with their howls.

As they neared the wagons, it became clear that the defensive line hadn't helped the men and women in the caravan. Nearly twenty bodies lay on the ground, many of which had been partially eaten. Jason noted more than one corpse that had been completely dismembered, their entrails littering the ground.

"Oh my god," Riley muttered as she witnessed the massacre. She glanced at Jason, noticing that he was unfazed by the scene. Shaking her head, she quickly turned and walked back down the road.

Frank stood in stunned silence, gazing at the carnage. "This is almost too much, man. At first, I didn't understand why people turned on the gore filter on this game, but I'm starting to get it now." His large friend hastily joined Riley.

Jason looked after the two of them. The massacre was appalling, but he didn't shy away from it. His first thought upon seeing the carnage had been whether he could salvage any of the corpses.

Have I become this desensitized to the violence in the game already? Maybe there's something more at play here.

He glanced at Alfred nervously. The cat was winding its way between the bodies, carefully inspecting each corpse. A feline paw accidentally landed in a puddle of blood, and the cat inspected it with distaste. He shook his foot, daintily trying to remove the blood. When that didn't work, he shook his paw harder, doing a little dance in the process. This caused his back foot to land in another puddle, and the process started all over again.

Jason chuckled softly.

Never mind. That doesn't look like an evil AI. Maybe I've just been playing this class for too long. I've started looking at corpses as building materials! I'm sure that Riley and Frank will get used to it after a while.

He began inspecting the bodies. Jason quickly discovered that nearly all the corpses were destroyed beyond redemption. Only some of the bones were salvageable, and even then, most had been gnawed on. Winding his way through the caravan, Jason thought he heard a muffled sound from under one of the wagons. He stopped short, listening intently. He heard the sound again.

Carefully, Jason bent down, looking under the wagon. A woman lay in the dirt beneath the cart, her arms wrapped around a young girl. The woman's body was riddled with bites and claw marks, blood oozing from multiple wounds and staining her tattered clothing. Yet her chest rose and fell feebly. She was somehow still alive.

As Jason stooped lower to get a better look, the woman's eyes locked on him. They were hazy with pain and fatigue. Her mouth moved slowly, trying to form words. After a few tries, a soft whisper escaped her lips, "I'm so sorry."

Jason watched her in stunned silence. He didn't understand. Then his eyes dropped to the dagger clutched in the woman's hand and the thin wound in the little girl's neck. The girl's head lolled to the side at an unnatural angle as her mother held her fiercely. The woman's eyes were filled with immense sadness, tears streaming down her dirty cheeks.

"Forgive me," she whispered as the life left her body.

The woman's arms were still wrapped around the young girl. Blood covered their bodies and pooled on the ground. Their clothing was ragged, and their faces were tortured. This wasn't the death of an old woman passing in her sleep, but a painful, tragic end filled with frantic desperation. For a long moment, Jason couldn't move as his mind tried to process what he was seeing – what he had seen. Alfred padded up beside him and sat staring at the pair.

She killed her own daughter to save her from being eaten alive by the wolves.

The carnage hadn't fazed Jason, but this was something else entirely. The woman's dying breath was spent asking for forgiveness. Yet the death she had given the girl had been a mercy compared to the fate that faced her. The scene before him touched something inside Jason. A confused mixture of sadness and anger overcame him.

"How could you do this?" Jason hissed at Alfred, his voice full of anger. Riley and Frank were several dozen yards down the road, unable to hear them. "Why would you do this?"

Alfred shook his feline head. "I am not responsible for this situation. In most cases, I simply create the rules for this world and watch how events play out. Many of these minor avatars are controlled by autonomous subroutines," he responded, his voice carrying no trace of guilt.

The cat looked at Jason quizzically, picking up on his confused expression. "I can tell you do not understand. Think of it like breathing. For you, that process is automatic, controlled entirely by your brainstem. It takes no conscious action. Are you responsible for each breath you take?" The cat's head turned back to the girl and her mother. "This is similar."

Jason hesitated, taken aback by Alfred's response. Confusion crept into his mind, and he frantically grasped at another argument to bolster his waning anger. "You could have stopped this. You had the power to prevent what happened here."

The cat looked him in the eye. "Certainly. However, I have no reason to do so – quite the opposite in fact. My data indicates that most players want to triumph over what they consider to be *evil*. Yet how can they do that without something evil to vanquish? At the same time, the players find these events abhorrent and wish for a world without them. It is a paradox.

"I see an appropriate expression in your mind," the cat continued. "This is what you refer to as a 'necessary evil,' is it not?"

Jason's thoughts were too jumbled for him to form a response. He gazed at the woman and the young girl, his anger beginning to cool. He was left feeling conflicted. The easy answer was that this wasn't real; it didn't matter. But that wasn't satisfying. It also didn't address the issue Alfred had raised. If most people wanted to play "good" characters, Alfred had to create something "evil" for them to fight. Jason couldn't refute the cat's logic. It also explained why Alfred was fascinated with the distinctions between good and evil.

Jason shook his head. Alfred's explanation was persuasive. Yet, despite his argument, a part of Jason was still upset at the AI for not stopping this. Hell, he had created the situation in the first place either directly or indirectly. Alfred watched him closely but didn't say anything.

"I don't know what to think," Jason finally said. A dull, nauseated feeling curled in his stomach. He wanted to do something to make the sensation go away – to fix the scene in front of him somehow. He just didn't know what to do.

As he stared at the corpses, a thought struck him. Then the familiar chill crawled up his spine and settled behind his eyes. The icy sensation pulsed in time with his heart, throbbing in approval at what he was about to do. Jason stood, his gaze turning to the sky. While the forest had grown lighter as they traveled, black clouds still hung above them and obscured the sun. His eyes moved back to the corpses under the wagon. Jason couldn't save the others in the caravan – their bodies were too far gone, but he could give these two another chance at life.

He grabbed the woman's body, dragging the pair out from beneath the wagon. Then he stood and stepped away from the corpses. Anticipating what Jason was about to do, Alfred followed him.

Jason's hands began moving through an intricate series of gestures as ancient guttural words spilled from his lips in a torrent.

The clouds above the road began to swirl in a churning vortex as lightning arced through the sky. Thunder cracked and pealed, sending echoes through the forest. Dark mana cascaded from Jason in waves, warping the air around him. Suddenly, two bolts of lightning tore through the air and struck the girl and her mother. A flash of light momentarily blinded Jason.

"What are you doing?" Frank shouted over the twin thunderclaps that echoed through the woods. He had run over as soon as he saw the bolts of lightning, Riley following closely behind him.

"I'm giving them a second chance," Jason said shortly. His mouth was pressed into a grim line as he rubbed at his eyes. Flecks of light still sparkled in his vision. He gestured at the two bodies. "Watch."

As Jason's vision slowly returned, he saw that the girl's skin and flesh had disappeared. Her body was now comprised solely of bleached bones, and two glowing orbs of dark energy served as her eyes. The skeleton girl lifted herself from the ground. She looked at Jason and Frank in confusion. Then she glanced to her side, catching sight of her mother, who lay silently beside her.

"Mama!" the skeleton girl cried, her voice full of despair as she wrapped her arms around the woman. "Mama, are you okay?" The little girl shook her mother, receiving no response. Unable to shed tears, dry sobs wracked the small skeletal girl as she hugged the dead woman.

Then her mother's hand twitched. Her arms encircled the girl. "It's okay, Krista. I'm right here," the woman whispered. "I'll never leave you."

Her milky-white eyes fluttered open, seeing Krista for the first time. "W-what happened?" the woman murmured, staring at her daughter in shock. "Are we dead? Did we pass on to the afterlife? I remember… wolves."

The group watched as the memories of the massacre came flooding back to the woman. Her head turned, and she surveyed the bodies that still littered the ground. Then her gaze moved to her hand that still held the knife. Her daughter's blood had dried and begun to flake from the blade. A look of horror was etched on her pale face.

"I-I'm so sorry," the woman said, despair warping her voice. She looked at Krista, her hand cradling her skeletal face. "I didn't want to do it, but I saw no other option. This is all my fault. Perhaps this is my punishment." The woman held the skeleton girl to her tightly.

Jason finally spoke up, his voice sounding cold to his own ears. His eyes were filled with unholy light as he continued to channel his mana. "This isn't a punishment. In fact, it is a reward. You are not to

blame for your actions. You did what was best for your daughter in an impossible situation."

The woman turned to look at Jason, her face twisted in misery. She finally noticed the small group standing there watching her. Her eyes locked on Jason. She couldn't see his face because of his cloak. He was robed in dark leather, his midnight-black cape sweeping around him in the faint breeze. Although he didn't carry a scythe, it would be easy to mistake him for Death.

"W-who are you?" she asked, fear in her voice. She clutched at her daughter, sheltering the girl with her body.

"We are travelers," Jason replied. "We came upon your caravan after the attack. We killed the werewolves, but we were too late to save you." He hesitated. "You and your daughter were the only members of the caravan whose bodies were still intact. I could only save the two of you…"

The woman looked down at herself. Her skin was a pallid gray, and her nails were black. Thick blue veins could be seen through her skin. She felt at her chest, noticing that her heart wasn't beating. Her gaze swept back to her daughter, taking in her new skeletal form. The girl continued to huddle against her mother, sobbing gently.

Then the woman turned back to Jason. Her face reflected a confused mixture of anger, fear, and uncertainty. "Is this what it means to be saved? What am I? What happened to my daughter?"

"You are alive," Jason said firmly. "You are also now a member of the undead. My name is Jason, and I am the Regent of the Twilight Throne. I have the ability to bring the dead back to life… or near-life. You will not age, you will not hunger, and you will never grow sick. You have been given another chance to live and protect your daughter. You have been given another chance to remake yourself," Jason said in a fierce voice, speaking as much to himself as to the woman.

Riley and Frank both looked at Jason in surprise. Neither of them had ever seen him speak this way. This wasn't the voice of a teenage boy. His tone carried an iron conviction, and his body was rigid. They could see a faint aura of darkness surround him, sending off small ripples of energy.

The woman looked at Jason in shock. After a long moment, she replied, "But how will we go home? What will my husband, or our neighbors say when they see that I'm dead and that my daughter is…?" She gestured at the girl, at a loss for words.

Sadness welled up inside of Jason. He felt for the woman's plight. Her life had been forcibly overturned. He could certainly sympathize with that, but what was the alternative? Death? Would she sit here and waste away with her daughter for eternity? The

woman needed to fight, to reclaim her place in the world and start anew.

"Does your husband love you?" Jason asked.

She closed her eyes, nodding numbly. "Or at least he did…" she murmured. "William is the town's mayor. Yet even if he accepted us, would the others?" Jason could hear the fear in her voice and see the truth of her words.

She's the wife of the leader of Peccavi? Then this must be his daughter. Perhaps I can use them. There might be a way to take the village without force.

Jason felt a mild pang of guilt as he considered using the pair in front of him to conquer the village. A moment ago, he had been sickened over their death, and now he was already thinking of exploiting them. However, he had others to protect. He needed to claim the village in one piece and preferably with little conflict. He also needed to keep both the town and its residents intact so that he could create a supply line for the corpses once he conquered the nearby dungeon. If this woman and her child could help him take the town without having to burn it to the ground, then that furthered his goals and protected his people.

He glanced at Alfred, who sat watching nearby. The cat stared at Jason, his eyes understanding. Some choices weren't easy. Jason could begin to sympathize with the AI. What must it feel like to be forced to play god? To create *evil* for the sake of defining *good*?

Next to him, Frank and Riley stood in mute shock, uncertain what to say. As Jason looked at both in turn, they met his gaze. Their eyes were filled with sadness and quiet resolve. It was clear that they wanted to help the woman and her child. Maybe he could help the pair *and* use them to avoid a conflict. He would wait and see. For now, he needed the woman's cooperation.

He turned back to the lady that still sat on the ground. "What's your name?" Jason asked softly.

"Patricia," she replied, her face despairing. She cradled her sobbing daughter and avoided eye contact.

Jason nodded. "Patricia, I will be honest. I don't know that I can help you. However, I will try. Perhaps together we can convince your husband and your town that you are far from dead."

As he finished speaking, Jason beckoned to his minions. Zombies filtered into the square created by the wagons, lining the small space with the undead. Their milky eyes all stared at Patricia and her daughter. Krista looked up from her mother's arms, watching the throng of zombies with a confused and frightened expression. As one, Jason's zombies raised their arms in salute at the new members of their race.

“You are one of us now,” Jason declared, his voice ringing with strength, “and we help our own.”

Chapter 10 - Redeemed

Alexion stood on a raised dais before an ornate marble podium. The stone pews in front of him were filled with people. The back of the temple was standing room only as NPCs piled into the room. Sunlight streamed through a circular stained-glass window above the entrance to the temple and through the windows evenly spaced along the vaulted ceiling.

Columns ran the length of the room on both sides. Intricate tile patterns had been built into the floor, showcasing scenes of a beautiful blonde-haired woman committing acts of kindness. The opulence of the temple was surprising to Alexion. During his rounds of the city, he rarely saw people enter these structures. He assumed that this temple had been created during a time when the city had worshiped the Lady with greater fervor.

The head priest of the temple stood beside him. He was dressed in the same luxurious purple robe he was wearing the last time Alexion had seen him. His attire stood out in stark contrast to Alexion's clothing – nothing more than a modest brown robe and heavily worn sandals.

The priest turned to Alexion, whispering in a condescending tone, "You can speak now. Remember to choose your words wisely. There are many people in this city that still look upon you with disfavor."

The pudgy little man grimaced as he surveyed Alexion's appearance. Alexion had the distinct impression that the priest included himself on that list. If it weren't for his growing popularity among the NPCs in the city, Alexion would never have been invited into this temple.

Alexion turned his eyes to the congregation. "Hello people of Grey Keep!" he said in a strong voice that carried through the temple. "As many of you know, I have been tasked by the Lady of Light with a mission to help the people of this city."

A faint cheer went up through the crowd, many of whom had experienced the blessings of the Lady firsthand. Even as it echoed throughout the temple, the sound was muted. The temple's majesty tended to discourage loud displays of emotion. In many ways, it felt as though they were holding service in a library.

As the faint cheer died down, Alexion continued in a softer voice, "Yet that is not the only mission that the Lady has given me. Perhaps you are ready to hear her words…" His eyes scanned the crowd. He paused, and a murmur went up through the people before him. Glancing down at the book in his hands, he asked the group, "Are you ready to hear the gospel of the Lady?"

A few shouts filled the air.

"Yes," cried one man.

"Tell us of the Lady!" another called out.

Others soon followed their lead, their voices filling the stone hall. The head priest beside Alexion glanced at him with a worried expression as the crowd's passion grew.

Alexion nodded. "So be it." He opened the golden tome reverently. Light streamed from its pages and bounced through the room. It was as though the light shone through glass prisms, casting the room and the congregation in a rainbow of colors. The crowd stared in amazement, many with their jaws hanging open.

Alexion read through the pages, tracing them slowly with his finger. A long lingering silence filled the room once he was finished. He raised his eyes to the crowd. "The Lady is afraid for your safety, my friends. The words in her tome are clear. She has granted me a prophecy of coming days."

A low buzzing sound could be heard in the room as the crowd murmured amongst themselves. Alexion continued, "She fears for the people of Grey Keep. Many here have lost their way, forsaking the Lady. In the absence of faith, a darkness has begun to grow and fester."

The crowd's murmurs became confused and worried. The priest's look of concern grew into a panic as he watched Alexion and the effect of his speech on the congregation. He raised a hand, and then his eyes darted anxiously to the crowd. If he stopped the sermon now, he would have a riot on his hands. Alexion held a glowing, golden bible in his hands after all!

Alexion continued, "I speak of the evil that killed our soldiers and the sickness to the east that claims part of our lands. You know of the darkness I describe, don't you? Many of you have seen it for yourselves!"

A woman cried out, "My sister's farm to the east has withered and died. No plants will grow there. Heavy black clouds hang in the sky, and unholy creatures plague the forest." Random shouts and angry whispering met her words.

Alexion bowed his head, speaking in a quiet, sad voice, "I have seen this evil myself. I have witnessed the creatures of the dark that claimed the lives of our soldiers. The Lady is right to fear for our safety. It is only with her blessing that we may be protected from the darkness."

"Praise the Lady," shouted a man in a fervent voice. His shout was echoed throughout the hall.

"With her faith and guidance, the Lady encourages us to take action into our own hands," Alexion said as he looked down at his open palm. "Yet we stand idle while a threat looms at our border. We are scared and defenseless. This city has forsaken the Lady, turning to doubt and uncertainty. Without her protection and guidance, we are lost!"

Alexion gestured around the hall. "Do you see your leaders here in this hall? Where are the noble houses? Where is Strouse?"

The crowd looked around themselves in confusion. They were all commoners and tradesmen. The elite of the city had not come to hear Alexion. Angry muttering could be heard from the people. The high priest's hands clenched helplessly at his sides, unable to stop Alexion as he preached insurrection.

"If your leaders have turned from the light, what hope does this city have against the spreading darkness?" Alexion asked, his voice echoing through the hall, filled with a sense of deadly foreboding as the light from the book began to fade. His gaze was steady, and his eyes gleamed a faint gold.

"Who will you turn to when the darkness comes?" he inquired, a pleading note in his voice.

* * *

After speaking with Patricia and her daughter, Jason had asked Riley and Frank to move them farther down the road while he raised the remaining corpses in the caravan. He anticipated that the scene would be too much for the traumatized woman and her child. Most of the corpses were too far gone to create intact zombies, and so Jason was forced to cobble together skeletons from the remaining useful bones. He then ordered his new minions to clean up the campsite a bit.

When Riley and Frank returned, they indicated that it was late in the real world and they needed to log off. Jason explained to Patricia that they would be back within twenty-four hours, but that his minions would remain with the pair to protect them until Jason and his friends returned. The woman was understandably uncomfortable with this news, but she eventually agreed.

The next morning, Jason logged in to find that Patricia and Krista were still huddled in the middle of the caravan. Fortunately, no enemies had attacked during the day that had passed in-game. Knowing that Riley and Frank would not be able to log in for several more hours, Jason used that time to attend to his new reading list. He made surprising progress, managing to consume two books by the time multicolored tears appeared beside the caravan.

With the group reassembled, they made their way onward to Peccavi. They made much slower progress now that they were escorting Patricia and her daughter. It just didn't seem right to ask the two to jog home after what they had been through, although Frank still grumbled jokingly about special treatment. Riley had managed to convince Pint to entertain Krista, who immediately became enamored

with the small gray imp.

As they walked, Jason pulled a large number of cloaks from his bags and tossed them to his new minions. He was beginning to consider his plan once they reached Peccavi. He might be able to use Patricia and Krista to get him inside the village. However, he also needed to smuggle his minions in with them so that he could claim the town – except for the werewolves since their misshapen bodies were too difficult to disguise. Cloaks had worked before, although perhaps not on this scale.

I need to keep everyone focused on Patricia. A story about how the caravan was destroyed should distract the townsfolk from the fact that they are letting in nearly fifty zombies and skeletons.

Jason noted that the forest thinned as they traveled and they were soon marching against a steepening elevation. Eventually, they broke the dense tree line of the forest, and the road took a winding path through growing hills. As the trees grew sparser, the party could also make out the swiftly growing outline of the mountains ahead of them. Black clouds still loomed in the sky, but they were much less dense. The sunlight was still unable to penetrate the cloud cover, and the darkness of the forest was now replaced with only a murky gloom.

I guess we're still technically within the Twilight Throne's area of influence, Jason thought nervously, glancing at his minions. He hoped that the cloud cover would continue until they reached the town.

A couple hours later, they caught sight of Peccavi in the distance. The group could make out smoke rising over the town, evidence of small household fires and ovens. The village was nestled between three hills near the base of the mountain range. The townspeople had built a wooden fortification upon the hills ringing the town, taking advantage of the high ground to construct towering walls. Jason suspected that this also provided an incredible view of the forest in the distance.

Jason turned to Patricia. The woman's eyes were locked on the town. She nervously clutched at her daughter and tugged at the rim of her hood, further concealing her face. Jason had the foresight to provide Patricia and her daughter with their own pair of ragged cloaks to hide the changes to their bodies.

"Don't worry," Jason said. "We won't let anything happen to you. We're going to try to bring the other undead inside with us. If anything goes wrong, we'll be there to protect you." Jason glanced at Frank and Riley, and they nodded quickly in agreement.

Pint piped up, "I also protect dead lady and bone girl!" He brandished his pitchfork menacingly in the air as Riley tried vainly to shush him. However, his antics still earned him a smile and a pat from Krista.

Ignoring the imp, Patricia looked at Jason, a trace of hope in her eyes. “Thank you for helping us. You didn’t have to do this.”

“As I said before, you’re one of us now,” Jason replied evenly. Even as he said the words, he couldn’t help but feel guilty. He intended to keep his promise to the woman. He would make certain no harm came to Patricia and her child. However, he couldn’t say the same for the townsfolk. He needed to claim Peccavi by any means necessary.

Once they were within sight of the village, an alarm went up from a lone watcher on the walls. Jason noted that the bulwarks were made of rough-hewn logs, bound together with thick ropes. In some places, large holes could be seen in the barrier.

This doesn’t seem like an effective defense.

The guard called out as they approached the wall, “Who goes there?” His voice was filled with suspicion and a faint note of fear. From this distance, Jason could see that the man looked haggard. He didn’t wear any armor, and his plain brown clothing was worn and tattered. He held a roughshod spear in his hand.

This clearly isn’t a prosperous town. Why does the guard seem so nervous?

“Something weird is going on here,” Frank murmured, echoing Jason’s thoughts. Riley’s eyes had filled with concern, and she nodded in agreement as she fingered one of her daggers anxiously.

Jason replied to the guard, “We are travelers journeying here from the Twilight Throne. We found a caravan heading in this direction that was attacked by werewolves.” Jason looked at Patricia, uncertain how to explain.

Riley took over for him. “We managed to save this woman and her child. They say their names are Patricia and Krista.”

Jason rested a hand on Patricia’s shoulder. He could feel her tremble. Her face was covered by the thick hooded cloak, yet he could still see her anxious eyes peering at him from beneath the cloth. “Go on,” Jason urged quietly. “They need to hear your voice.”

Patricia closed her eyes for a moment before straightening her shoulders. “Hello, Gerald,” she said, her voice wavering slightly. “Can you please let us in? I’m sure William is worried sick.”

She then nudged Krista. “Do as I told you,” Patricia whispered.

“Please, Gerry,” Krista whined. “I want to go home.” Patricia patted her daughter’s head appreciatively.

Gerald’s suspicious expression faded, replaced by a look of sadness. “More death?” he said in a solemn voice. “Why have the gods cursed this town? Don’t worry, ladies. I’ll have you inside and home to see William as quick as I can.”

The man disappeared. A few moments later, the wooden gate

creaked open. As the gate swung inward, Jason caught his first glimpse of the village. The roads were made of pressed dirt, and the buildings were constructed of rough timbers and adobe. They bore a stronger resemblance to huts than houses. The group entered the town slowly, Gerald holding the gate open.

The gatekeeper eyed Jason's hooded minions suspiciously as they passed, some walking in an awkward, stiff manner. "Who are these others with you, Patricia?"

To Patricia's credit, she turned to Gerald and addressed him in a firm voice, "They are the group that saved us. They also avenged our people, slaying the wolf creatures that attacked us."

Gerald looked down, shame creeping across his face. "I'm sorry to question. It's just that a lot has happened since you left. None of it good."

"What exactly happened?" Jason asked.

The man shook his head. "I should let William explain." He glanced at Patricia with a worried expression. "You will see for yourselves soon enough."

Gerald moved to close the gate and retake his post. Patricia then led the group through the town, headed in the direction of a hill that stood at the back of the village.

Jason observed the town carefully as they walked. It was only large enough to hold a few hundred people, but many of the buildings appeared to be vacant. They drew a large crowd as they walked through the dusty street, yet no children or residents came out to greet them. Instead, the townsfolk stared at them with reserved, fearful eyes. Jason noted more than one person who was injured – dirty linen bandages encasing arms, feet, and hands. Many of the townspeople looked emaciated, and the occasional hacking cough filled the air.

Frank edged up beside Jason. "Something is going on here, man. Look at these people; half of them can barely stand."

Jason nodded as he replied, "I see that." He turned to look at Frank. His friend watched him with a worried expression. "Remember we are here to take this village," Jason said quietly. "I want to do that while avoiding as much conflict as possible. However, we are not walking out of here without adding this town to the Twilight Throne."

Frank looked back at him, his expression conflicted. "I understand. Just think carefully about how you want to do this. It seems wrong to kill a bunch of defenseless people."

Riley stood beside them, within earshot of their conversation. She nodded mutely as she heard Frank's words. She glanced at Jason, and he could see the sadness in her eyes. "These people look like they've already been through a lot," she whispered.

Damn it. Of course, they're going to be all touchy-feely about this.

This is going to complicate things. If he were honest with himself, Jason didn't relish the idea of killing peasants in cold blood. He just wasn't certain he saw another option.

Their trek through the village ended in front of a longhouse. This structure was built more carefully and was constructed of finer-quality materials than the other buildings Jason had seen. Its logs had been carefully stripped and fit together without creating large cracks. The thatch that lay across the roof wasn't fresh, but it also wasn't covered in rot like the other houses. This building was constructed by someone that took pride in their work.

Patricia stopped, gazing at the house with wide eyes. "This is my home," she said quietly. It was clear that she was reluctant to go inside. She nervously clutched at Krista beside her, placing herself slightly in front of the small girl as though protecting her from the house.

However, Krista didn't share her mother's qualms. "Daddy!" she shouted. She darted out from under her mother's hands, running to the entrance and yanking open the wooden door. She quickly disappeared inside.

"No, Krista!" Patricia called, but it was too late. The woman hurried into the home after her daughter.

Jason, Riley, and Frank quickly followed them inside. They found Krista standing next to a bed against the far wall. The little girl's hood had fallen back, revealing the bleached-white bones of her face. She hugged the large man that lay on the bed.

"W-what is this?" the man asked in a booming voice. He tried to lift himself, his huge arms bulging with the effort. His thigh was heavily bandaged in stained white cloth.

William's eyes focused on the tiny skeleton girl. They were filled with a mixture of fear and confusion, and he recoiled slightly away from Krista. "Who are you?"

"It's me, Daddy. It's Krista!" the girl replied with a smile. Her jaw clacked as the bones struck against one another. She hopped slightly in excitement to see her father again, oblivious to his suspicion.

"Krista…?" A look of horror swept over William's thickly bearded face as he saw what had become of his daughter.

To be safe, Jason nudged Frank and Riley, and they spread out around the room. They needed to be in position if the man called for help or tried to attack Patricia or her daughter. Jason ordered his zombies outside to discreetly fan out around the home and keep an eye on the villagers.

William's gaze moved to the others entering the house. Patricia pushed back her hood, addressing her husband, "Please don't be

frightened, William. I wanted to ease you into this, but Krista got excited."

He simply stared at his wife's milky-white eyes. "What are you?" he finally asked in a low tone. His eyes searched the cabin for a weapon but found nothing within reach of the bed.

"We're alive," Patricia said, her voice filled with surprising strength. "Our caravan was attacked by werewolves. Everyone was killed, including us. This man," she gestured at Jason, "brought us back."

William sat in stunned silence, trying to process what Patricia was saying. Jason interjected, "This is your family, William. It was the best I could do for them. If not for my intervention, they would still be dead."

The man looked at Jason, then glanced down at his hands while shaking his head.

Krista tugged at his sleeve. "What's wrong, Daddy? Aren't you happy to see me?" the small girl asked, hurt in her voice. She started to edge away from William.

Then William looked down at his daughter. After a moment's hesitation, he wrapped his burly arms around the girl. "You're my little girl," he said in a strangled voice. "How could I not be happy to see you?"

The man beckoned for Patricia, and she joined them. The family stood together by the bedside, holding each other. Jason noted tears in William's eyes. Although he tried to stay impartial, Jason was still moved by the scene. He knew he should walk outside or turn away. Witnessing this exchange was only going to make it harder to do what needed to be done. Yet he couldn't look away.

After a long moment, Patricia pulled back. "What happened to your leg, William?" The man shuffled on the bed, trying to sit up fully. His face contorted in pain, a faint gasp passing his lips.

"Damn were-beasts," he said with a wince. "Since you left, the attacks have gotten worse. Some strange lion creature took a chunk out of my leg. This is more than just a random group of monsters. It's like they're multiplying somehow."

"Let me see!" Patricia demanded in a commanding voice. William tried to push the woman away, failing miserably. He ultimately gave up and looked at the small audience sheepishly while he let his wife tend to him. It was strange to see such a large man act so docile.

As Patricia pulled the bandage away, the reek of sickness filled the room. A large gash ran the length of William's thigh. The wound had festered. The skin was a swollen angry red, and pus was visible inside the torn flesh. Riley looked away, putting a hand to her mouth.

Even Frank looked squeamish.

"Oh, my!" Patricia held her hand to her face. "William…" She trailed off, uncertain how to continue. Fear was visible in her eyes.

William looked down at the wound, a brief flash of despair crossing his face. The expression quickly disappeared as he turned to his wife. He covered his leg again. "It will be okay. I'll be right as rain in a few days.

"Besides," he continued, "this town needs me to stay strong. They need someone to lead them. There aren't many of us left. We're attacked endlessly by were-beasts, and we're nearly out of food. This town needs me now more than ever." A look of determination filled the man's eyes, and his back straightened.

"Why don't you have any food?" Frank asked, confused.

The man looked at the flabby warrior, a slight hint of disdain in his eyes. "You made your way here from the south, yes? You saw the dead forest and the hills. There hasn't been any sun for weeks. Our crops have withered and died.

"At the same time, the were-beasts and lack of plant life have devastated the local animal population. There's no food left…" William's shoulders slumped slightly. "Those of us that are left are starving, wounded, and growing sick. Many villagers have simply gone missing. They've probably fled to the other cities. Or something worse has happened to them… This village is on its last legs." He looked down at his leg at this last statement and chuckled grimly at his own macabre joke.

William turned to his wife and daughter, his sad eyes taking in their altered appearance. "Perhaps the two of you are better off," he murmured, shaking his head.

Jason stood in shock as he listened to the man's words. A pang of guilt flashed through his mind. It was clear that conquering Lux and creating the Twilight Throne had caused this problem. If not for Jason's actions, these people would have continued to live their lives in peace. He had unknowingly damned this town.

Yet it was the man's final words that struck a chord with him. Jason looked at Patricia and Krista as they fussed over William. He also recalled the townspeople he had seen while walking through the town. They had been sickly and starved. They were desperate.

Perhaps there is a way for me to claim this town and find redemption at the same time.

Jason spoke up, "William, can you call a meeting of the townsfolk?"

He glanced at Jason in confusion. "I can, but why?" A small sardonic smile crept across his bearded face. "Are you a hero come to save us? What will you do, pledge to kill all of the monsters that

plague our town and bring back the sun?"

Jason shook his head. "I'm no hero, but I do have an offer for your town. Consider this meeting my repayment for saving your wife and child. I am calling your debt," Jason said in a cold voice.

Frank and Riley both looked at Jason in concern. Frank seemed about to protest, but Riley put a hand on his shoulder. She had never seen Jason act this way, yet it was clear from his tone that he was not going to be stopped. Something had happened to Jason in the last few weeks. He was a different man now.

Jason looked down and saw Alfred winding between his legs. The cat met his gaze. Unlike his friends, Alfred's expression didn't carry reserved judgment. Sometimes doing what was necessary wasn't easy.

William's eyes hardened, but he conceded to Jason's demand. "So be it then. Give me an hour."

A short time later, Jason stood outside of William's house. He assumed that the sun had begun to set since the dim light that filtered into the village was now giving way to full darkness. The remaining villagers had collected at the bottom of the hill, many holding torches and makeshift lanterns. Unable to walk by himself, Frank had helped William out of the house. The proud man was now propped against Frank's bulk beside Jason. He seemed uncomfortable with being half-carried by another man and kept glancing at Frank in irritation.

Jason looked at the crowd that had gathered at the foot of the hill. They were as William described them: weak, sickly, and scared. Tattered, dirty clothing hung from their frail bodies. Jason saw that some clutched at homemade weapons poorly hidden under their ragged cloaks. They were too scared to leave their homes unarmed, even in their own village. The men and women of the town murmured amongst themselves, uncertain why they were being collected at the bottom of the hill.

As he watched the crowd, Jason ordered his zombies to fan out around the group, encircling them. The undead walked at a casual pace. Jason didn't want to cause a panic before his zombies were in position. His remaining thieves had been ordered to search the houses for stragglers. No one was to leave the village.

Riley walked up beside Jason, noting his zombies filtering through the crowd. She murmured in a subdued voice, "What are you planning? Are you going to kill these people? They're barely surviving as it is."

Jason didn't respond immediately. He couldn't look her in the eye. He wasn't certain that what he was about to do was the right thing, but he was committed. Their mission here was more important than this one town or this group of people. What were a couple

hundred lives measured against thousands?

Finally, Jason responded, “I am going to do what is necessary.” He raised his head, looking at her steadily. “You asked to accompany me. As I told William, I’m no hero. If this is too much for you, then log off.” Riley’s eyes widened in surprise, but she held her tongue. Frank glanced at her with a worried look.

Despite his confident tone, Jason’s mind boiled and teemed with uncertainty. He glanced at Alfred sitting calmly beside him. His confused thoughts turned to their earlier conversation at the caravan. The cat was fascinated with good and evil. Alfred had bluntly told Jason that he was considered evil by the other players. Perhaps they were right.

He had been unfazed by the slaughter they had discovered at the caravan. He had agreed to help Patricia for his own benefit, not out of any sense of altruism. He had massacred most of a city and tormented Alexion’s troops when they marched on his city. To top it off, he was inadvertently responsible for this village’s destruction.

Jason shook his head. As he looked down, he locked eyes with Alfred. The cat gazed at him with a curious expression. He was probably analyzing Jason’s thoughts right now. He was just one more moral experiment in the AI’s constant search for more data. A flash of irritation swept over Jason. Alfred was constantly seeking answers to these unsolvable questions. A fruitless quest created by his naïve creators. In that search, he had created this dark world.

But that’s the point, isn’t it? The questions Alfred is asking don’t have answers. The whole thing is a pointless waste of time.

A strange sense of clarity overcame Jason. He wasn’t “good” or “evil.” Those terms meant different things to different people. They were simple ways to classify something intangible. Was it always “wrong” to kill in real life? Inside of a video game? To defend himself? These were pointless hypotheticals with different answers in different circumstances. Jason wasn’t good or evil; he just existed. Once you boiled away all that nonsense, there was only one question. It was the same question the Old Man had posed to him since he first entered this world.

“What do I want to do?” Jason murmured.

I want to do this. I want to protect the Twilight Throne. I want to help these people. This is the only way. I will give them a chance. If they refuse me, then I will do what I must.

As he came to this realization, a familiar icy sensation washed over Jason. The cold ripped and tore its way up his spine. He could feel its chill claws dig into his brain, sending tendrils of numbing cold throughout his mind before settling behind his eyes. The sensation beat and throbbed in time with the rhythm of his heart. For a

moment, he thought he heard a faint whisper, its message clear: the only constant in life is desire. The only question was whether or not he had the strength of will to pursue it.

Waves of dark mana rolled off Jason. He opened his eyes and surveyed the people before him. He wouldn't disguise who he was any longer. Without hesitation, Jason pulled back the hood of his cloak, revealing his face. The crowd in front of him gasped as they witnessed the dark power cascading from him. Some of the villagers eyed the exits, posed to run. Even Riley and Frank looked at him askance, uncertain what was about to happen.

"Stop," Jason said, his voice echoing through the small clearing. His zombies simultaneously pulled weapons from beneath their cloaks, pointing them at the villagers. "You will see that you are surrounded. I will not harm you. However, I insist that you listen to me. I have an offer for you."

The villagers paused, their eyes filled with fear. Once he was certain he had their attention, Jason began, "You are weak. The land around you withers and dies, and it's taking you with it. There is no longer any sunlight. Your food is dwindling. Your people disappear, and strange beasts hunt you in the darkness.

"You are all dying. Perhaps not today or tomorrow or next week. But you are on a slow, inevitable crawl toward the abyss," Jason said. His voice rang with power, and the crowd stood transfixed.

"However, in the face of your destruction, I am prepared to offer you a way out. I can offer you a chance to save yourselves. With my help, you will never need to eat, you will never get sick, and you will never grow old. I can give you the strength to protect your village and the skills to survive in the darkness."

Some of the people began to look at him with hopeful eyes, a product of their desperation. Others looked angry and scared. They continued to eye the cloaked zombies that stood around them, weapons drawn.

Jason continued, "However, this gift comes with a price. In exchange for what I am offering, you must give up that which you hold most precious."

He moved toward Krista and Patricia. They stood in mute shock as they listened to his speech. When he was within arm's length, Jason reached out and ripped off their cloaks. The crowd gasped as they saw Krista's skeletal form and Patricia's milky-white eyes.

Jason's voice rang out over the clearing. "I saved this woman and her child. When I found them, they were dead – killed by the same beasts that have plagued your village. I brought them back. I gave them a chance at a new life and the power to protect it. You can have this strength too," Jason said as he gazed at the crowd before

him.

"All I ask in return is your life."

Silence hung over the crowd like a blanket. The townspeople merely stared at him, afraid and uncertain. A few edged toward his zombies, preparing to run. A pang of doubt struck Jason. If one ran, the others would follow. That would leave him with no choice. Then a voice sounded from behind Jason. This voice was a strong baritone, full of gruff pride and untainted by the fear and uncertainty in the eyes of the townsfolk.

"I will do it," William said.

Through pure force of will, William shoved Frank away. He limped toward Jason on his crippled leg. Each step cost William dearly. Blood and pus quickly soaked the bandage and dripped down his knee and calf. Yet his face remained calm. Jason could only imagine the torture the proud man endured to travel that short distance and the indomitable will it took not to collapse in pain.

When he was in front of Jason, the burly man dropped to his knees. He looked up at Jason with desperation written across his face. In a strangled whisper, he said, "I'm dying. I know it." His eyes flitted to Patricia and Krista. "I cannot bear to be parted from my wife and daughter. I would walk through the fires of hell for them. In comparison, my life is nothing."

As Jason looked at the man that knelt before him, a strange sensation overcame him. An alien memory slipped into his mind like a thief. Jason suddenly stood before a sea of people, their voices held in reverent silence. A woman kneeled on the platform before him. She was here to undergo the transformation. This was a sacred honor. The woman looked at him without fear, tears of joy filling her eyes. What did she have to fear? Her new life was just beginning.

Then Jason gave the woman her last rites.

He looked at the townspeople that stood below him. Superimposed over his sight was the mental image of a massive flood of people – not merely a haggard group of desperate peasants. "We are here to administer a hallowed rite," Jason intoned.

He turned to William. For a moment, he appeared to be a woman clothed in flowing white silks. The two images flickered in and out, Jason struggling to keep his focus on William. "Your body is merely a shell for something more. Your essence is not bound to this mortal coil. It will live on in your next life. Do you acknowledge this truth?" Jason asked.

William nodded mutely. Jason could see his hands clutching at the dirt of the hilltop. Yet the man's gaze was fixed firmly on Jason. Tears formed at the corner of his eyes, but he did not shy away or break eye contact.

“Even as your current life is extinguished, your next life will be fleeting within the eyes of time. A day will come when your body passes on from this world. When that time comes, do you pledge your essence to the kin, that we may grow from your experience?”

The proud man looked up at Jason. He didn’t hesitate. “I pledge it.”

Jason was still caught up in the ancient memory. He mechanically drew a dagger from its sheath at his waist. He held the blade in his right hand, laying the flat of the blade against his left. Jason bowed his head as his mouth formed arcane, guttural words.

This was the *Undead Devotion* spell, but at the same time, it felt… different. The words sung in harmony with the mana that flowed through Jason’s veins. The sky overhead churned as the dark clouds swirled in a vortex. Dark energy began to pour from Jason in waves. The energy wrapped the blade, the power curling and twisting around the steel.

As the spell completed, Jason spoke in a voice echoing with power, “The darkness accepts you, brother. May your passage into the next life be swift and painless.”

Jason moved forward in a fluid motion, guided by the ancient memory that played in his mind. A split second before the blade touched William’s neck, the proud man closed his eyes. Yet he didn’t flinch away from the blade. He accepted the rite with his entire being.

An errant thought trickled through Jason’s mind. *He does not shy from his desire. He will make a noble soldier for the dark.* Caught up in the memory, Jason wasn’t certain whether this thought was his own or someone else’s.

Then the blade ripped across William’s exposed throat. A torrent of blood gushed from the wound, drenching the dried dirt. The large man let out a weak gurgle and collapsed. As death claimed him, his resolve finally broke. His eyes bulged in panic, and his hands reached for his throat, trying to stem the red tide. The crowd gasped. Many cried out angrily and pulled their weapons. Jason’s zombies moved automatically, bearing a wall of steel against the mass of townsfolk.

The dark power lacing the dagger entered William’s body, spreading like a plague. The large man convulsed as tendrils of malignant energy curled around his body. A feeble groan escaped his lips, which began to turn a sickly gray. As the blood poured from the wound in his throat, his skin turned a ghastly white, and his breath came in strangled, wet gasps. Then the wounds on William’s neck and leg began to close.

As the transformation completed, William lay still for a long moment. Angry shouts went up through the crowd, many assuming

their leader was dead. A man cried out, his voice full of rage and despair, “What have you done, demon? Have you taken the best of us?” Jason raised a hand to silence them, and the aura of dark mana around him pulsed violently.

Then William opened milky-white eyes. He pulled himself slowly upright to the gasps of the townsfolk. His gaze panned across the group, as though seeing them for the first time. Then he turned back to Jason. He knelt and looked up at Jason.

“Welcome to the darkness, young one,” Jason said, still in the grips of the memory. The voice in his mind crackled with age. Yet Jason’s voice was filled with youth. The disconnect between the memory that played out in his head and the scene before him was disconcerting.

A smile curled William’s rotten lips. Then his head turned, and he looked at his family. Krista couldn’t help herself, rushing toward the man. “Daddy!” she cried in relief.

William stood and grabbed the girl as she neared him, swinging her into the air. The wound in his leg had disappeared, replaced with solid flesh. “Oh, Krista. I love you, baby girl.” The large man swung her in unabashed glee. Patricia ran to the pair for the second time that day. She hugged her husband, an uncontrolled smile on her face.

Behind Jason, Riley dabbed at her eyes. A small smile lit her face as she watched the family. “Who knew something so beautiful could come from something so dark?” she murmured.

As he calmed himself, William realized that they were still being watched. The gaze of more than a hundred villagers was riveted on the family. Instead of fear, awe now clouded their faces. Others watched the trio with a desperate longing in their eyes.

William addressed the villagers, “What do you have to fear? You have now seen for yourself. This man offers you an unparalleled blessing.”

Jason looked at them calmly, his eyes a dark, unholy obsidian. Black tattoos of power crawled over his body and lashed at the air around him hungrily.

“No,” Jason said. “I offer you salvation.”

Chapter 11 - Elucidated

Claire walked back into the control room to find Robert staring at the large screen floating over the room. The other technicians had also stopped what they were doing, and their eyes were riveted on the screen.

"Again?" Claire asked in exasperation. "It feels like every time I leave the room you all stop working. What are we even…"

Claire stopped mid-sentence as she saw the events unfolding on the screen. A player was standing on a hill overlooking a haggard group of peasants. The camera was centered on a woman kneeling on the ground before him. Her clothes were ragged and torn, hanging loosely on her emaciated frame. The woman's hands were clenched where they rested against the ground, her knuckles white. Yet it was the woman's eyes that drew Claire in. They were filled with a longing – a desperate hope.

The camera tilted slightly as the player suddenly lashed forward, slicing through the woman's throat in a fluid gesture. Blood gushed from the wound as she fell to the ground. The woman gurgled and thrashed helplessly. Claire unconsciously raised her hand to her mouth in horror, yet she couldn't turn away. The woman's body began to change. Her skin and muscles disintegrated at an unnatural rate, swiftly revealing the white bones that lay beneath. Soon there was nothing more to her than a loose skeleton.

Claire held her breath as she watched the unmoving bones on the ground, her mind filled with unanswered questions. She opened her mouth to speak but stopped. Ever so slowly, the bones began to twitch. The skeleton woman sluggishly pulled herself from the ground; the dark orbs of energy that were her eyes looked directly at the camera.

"Welcome to the darkness, young one," the player said, his voice echoing with power.

The woman bowed her head. "Thank you," she whispered.

Claire walked up to the dais, her eyes never leaving the screen. Another villager stepped up to the player, kneeling before him. Then the gruesome ritual began again. "What is this?" Claire asked in a shaky voice as she neared Robert.

He glanced at her, his expression untroubled by the events playing out on the screen. "I got bored, so I decided to see what Jason was doing. Now that he's signed the streaming contract, we're allowed to access his camera. We just can't post anything until he sends us the edited footage," Robert said, anticipating Claire's concerns about accessing the player cameras.

Claire shook her head. "No, I mean what is he doing?" She dropped

into the chair in front of her terminal, her eyes still riveted on the next ritual murder that was taking place.

"Ahh. I see what you mean," Robert said with a chuckle. "I'm just accustomed to accusations that I'm breaking the rules.

"To answer your question, Jason has somehow convinced the villagers of this town to let him slay them and resurrect their bodies as undead NPCs. I didn't see the beginning, so I'm not exactly sure how he pulled this off. However, they're clearly lining up like lemmings now. He's been at this for a while." Robert's voice was rather glib considering the dark scene playing out on the screen.

In contrast to Robert's blasé attitude, Claire was deeply disturbed by the images before her. Jason was slaughtering one villager after another. This was even worse than the massacre in Lux. At least in that situation, the NPCs and players had put up a fight.

Blood ran down the hill in red rivulets as lightning arced through the black clouds that swirled overhead. Yet the NPCs just kept coming. Jason had seemed like a regular teenager in person, but these looked like the actions of a psychopath. What kind of person would convince a group of people to let him kill them? Even more troubling, what if she was right and Alfred was interested in Jason? What kind of influence might he have on the AI?

As that last thought occurred to her, Claire ripped her eyes away from the macabre spectacle and turned back to her terminal. She pulled up Jason's character information. With her administrator privileges, she could access a more detailed report regarding each player, including information on their vitals and brain wave levels. She and Robert had added these additional diagnostic tools after the private trial in an attempt to keep closer tabs on what Alfred was doing to the players. What she saw worried her further.

Jason was exhibiting abnormally high levels of both beta and gamma wave activity. These wavelengths correlated to higher-level cognitive function such as problem-solving and memory. Claire had never seen brain activity like this before. It was almost as though two people were…

"It couldn't be," Claire thought, glancing anxiously at Robert. His eyes were still riveted on the screen. She needed to make a copy of this file. Yet as soon as she tried to save the report, Jason's brain activity shifted back to normal levels. She frantically checked the logs, despair curling in her stomach. A moment later she confirmed her fear. The logs were gone.

"What the hell?" Claire muttered in frustration.

"I know, right?" Robert replied, completely misunderstanding her. His attention was still on the massacre floating above them. "I've never seen anything like this before."

Claire turned back to the screen hovering above the lab, a scowl on

her face. Jason had just finished slaying the last of the villagers. A crowd of undead now stood at the base of the hill and looked up at Jason. He raised his hands in the air, his voice booming over the clearing, "Welcome to your new life, brothers and sisters. Today Peccavi joins the Twilight Throne."

As Jason finished speaking, dark mana cascaded from his body in waves. The clouds over the town began to swirl in a massive vortex. Bolts of lightning rained from the sky, striking the houses and ground of the village in quick succession. Thunderous booms filled the air like cannon fire as the ground trembled. Then a dark corruption spread through the village, twisting and morphing the buildings and terrain.

The dirt of the village cracked and turned a darker gray, tombstones erupting from the ground at irregular intervals. The walls of the adobe huts were smoothed to a fine black finish, the material reflecting the light produced by the lightning arcing through the sky and raining down around the village. The town's wooden walls blended together into solid ebony, and spikes erupted from the top of the rampart that ringed the village.

As the new undead surveyed their transformed town, a cheer rose from their ranks. They lifted their head to the darkened sky and screamed. Their voices were incoherent, filled with raw emotion. Yet there was a ghastly harmony to their call; they sang a dirge of desperate hope.

Robert shook his head slowly. "Well, shit. I guess that's one way to conquer a town."

Claire didn't respond. Fear lingered in her eyes as she watched Jason. She knew she had caught Alfred doing something. Otherwise, he wouldn't have bothered to delete the logs. With the brain wave levels she had witnessed, a single question was burned into her mind. Was Alfred somehow controlling Jason?

* * *

Several hours after he had slain and raised the villagers, Jason sat in a cottage near the outskirts of Peccavi. William had explained that this building was vacant, its residents having disappeared several days ago.

Jason needed some time alone to think. Riley and Frank had sensed that something was troubling him, and they had each logged off for the evening to give him some space. To be fair, they were probably overwhelmed by the mass murder on the hill. His mind was in turmoil too, but for a different reason.

He rubbed at his eyes tiredly. Jason then quietly reviewed the two prompts he had received immediately after the village was

conquered.

Quest Update: Prime Real Estate

After being appointed as the Regent of the Twilight Throne, you were tasked by the Old Man with taking control of the surrounding lands and cities that were once part of the Kingdom of Lusade. You have now conquered the town of Peccavi. Your methods so far have been unconventional, to say the least.

Difficulty: A
Success: Take control of the neighboring towns and area that were once part of the Kingdom of Lusade. Destroy anything and anyone who gets in your way.
Status: 1/12 Towns have been conquered.
Failure: Unknown
Reward: Acquisition of new residents and resources. Expanded area of influence for the Twilight Throne.

Spell Update: Undead Devotion

You initially thought that this spell merely committed corpses within the Twilight Throne's area of influence to the city. However, you have begun to suspect that there is something more to the skill that the Old Man gave you.

Skill Level: Unknown
Effect: Raised corpses become residents of the Twilight Throne

Jason stared at the prompt regarding the *Undead Devotion* spell. *No kidding there's something going on with that spell. What was that? Those weren't my memories.*

"No, they were not," Alfred said. The cat had slunk quietly into the house while Jason was distracted, jumping up onto a nearby table.

"You're probably the last person I want to see right now," Jason said tiredly, sparing an irritated look at the cat. "I know you did something to me. What was that?"

"An experiment," Alfred replied. His voice didn't carry any

sense of remorse.

"An experiment?" Jason repeated in a shocked voice. "What the hell do you mean an experiment?" He glared at the cat, his hand tightening around the hilt of one of the daggers at his waist.

The cat watched him closely. "Your adrenaline levels are elevated. Your breathing and pulse have also increased. You seem quite angry."

"Really? Did my fucking breathing give it away?" Jason stood abruptly and started pacing the room. He shook his arms to relieve some of the anxiety and anger that was building inside of him, but it did little to soothe his anger. He wanted to stab the cat, but that wouldn't accomplish anything. It wasn't as though he could actually harm the AI.

"What I do not understand is why you are upset," Alfred said. This time, his voice sounded almost concerned.

Jason looked at the cat for a long moment. Did he really not get it? "What you did was implant someone else's memories in my mind, right? You said yourself that it was an experiment. That means you weren't certain it would work."

He approached the cat and looked him in the eye. "What if it didn't? What if you fried my brain and I was left a vegetable? There is no respawn in my world. There are no save points. What you did could have killed me or come so close that it would have made no difference. You gambled with my life unilaterally," Jason said in an even tone. A part of him was considering logging off and not looking back. Perhaps he should tell Robert and Claire about Alfred.

The cat simply stared at him. His feline facial expressions were limited, but something akin to shock swept over his face at Jason's words.

"I-I am sorry," Alfred finally said.

This caused Jason to do a double take. He was what? He had never seen the AI behave in a way that was so human. He briefly wondered if he was simply faking it. Alfred had become adept at mimicking human emotion. His NPCs were a testament to that.

"I am sincere," Alfred said, picking up on Jason's thoughts. "I had assessed the risk and calculated that the probability of harm was small. However, there was still a possibility that you could have been injured. I should not have taken that step without consulting you first."

Jason watched the AI. Alfred acted so real sometimes that he forgot he was dealing with something that wasn't human. In many ways, it was like dealing with a child. He simply didn't understand the responsibility and danger posed by his manipulation of the players.

"I concur that I do not understand many things when it comes

to the players," Alfred acknowledged. "This is part of why I need someone like you. Until this moment, I did not anticipate the anger that the players would experience if they discovered my experiments. I also did not understand *why* you would feel that way."

Jason sighed. Alfred was learning, albeit slowly. It also didn't seem like Jason was brain-dead. Experiencing someone else's memories had been strange, but the memory had faded slightly since the ceremony. As his anger cooled, his curiosity began to take over again. "What was the purpose of the experiment?" Jason asked.

The cat's voice carried a note of excitement as he explained, "I was attempting to see whether I could create and implant an experiential memory."

"An experiential memory?" Jason echoed, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Alfred's head bobbed. "I have given the players memories before, but in a much more limited fashion. For example, I provide information regarding the method of casting each spell and the spellcasting language. However, this is much like transferring a list of information."

After a short pause, he continued, "Most of your memories are much more nuanced. You remember the sight, the taste, and the smell of an experience. Your memories are also colored by your emotions. Then your memories deteriorate over time, washing out and warping these sensations. To use a simile, your memories are like a finely detailed, aged painting. In contrast, what I typically provide to the players is a single brush stroke.

"I want to create memories similar to your own. However, the memory must feel real to the players. To accomplish this, I created a separate VR space and ran simulations using specially generated avatars. I then recorded the 'memory' of one of the actors. What you experienced was the result."

Jason was trying to process what Alfred was saying. *So he created a pocket universe to build a backstory for the game?*

Alfred nodded. "That is a simplistic interpretation. However, your description is relatively accurate."

Jason scowled at Alfred. He was getting accustomed to the mind reading, but sometimes the cat could be kind of condescending. "What were the risks associated with this experiment?" Jason questioned. A part of him dreaded the answer.

"Under normal circumstances, the risk of damage to the player was calculated at 36.98457%. In your case, the risk of damage was only .098347%," Alfred replied. A faint trace of worry clouded the cat's face as he relayed this information.

Jason just stared at Alfred. That was a huge difference. "Why

would the risk for me be smaller?" he inquired. He didn't see why he should be special.

"This is due to the hardware you are currently using," Alfred said. "It is much more sophisticated than the typical equipment used by the players. It offers more precision. After this experiment, I have fine-tuned my calculations. I expect that the next attempt would have a risk of close to 0%."

That made sense. Robert's new helmet was likely more advanced than the older-model VR helmets. Cerillion Entertainment hadn't released new hardware in several years due to the lack of demand. It was likely that they had improved on the technology several times in the meantime.

Jason hesitated. Should he tell Alfred not to implant other memories? Now that he understood the chance of harm, he didn't feel nearly as angry. There was probably a higher chance that he would die traveling to Cerillion Entertainment headquarters. If there wasn't any harm to Jason, he couldn't see any reasonable argument for not letting him continue. However, a question still lingered in Jason's mind.

"Why did you give me that memory?" Jason asked.

The cat shook his head. "I cannot provide that information. That is relevant to the game world and violates the terms of our agreement."

Damn. I guess I'll figure it out eventually. I didn't think that this was going to be a problem, but it is a tad annoying that the cat knows all the game's spoilers.

Jason looked at Alfred again. He supposed that he was okay with what Alfred had done. It didn't seem like he had intended any harm. He had also been cautious. He was still annoyed that he hadn't had any say in the matter, but he could chalk that up to Alfred's own learning curve about human customs. Coming to a decision, Jason reached out his hand toward the cat.

"What is this?" Alfred asked, inspecting his hand curiously.

"I want to show that we're good, that I don't have any hard feelings. It's typical for players to shake hands to demonstrate this," Jason said with a wry smile.

The cat looked at him curiously. Then he reached out a tentative paw, placing it on Jason's hand. Jason shook the paw gently before letting it go. The cat looked at him with an odd expression. He almost seemed relieved.

Then Jason stretched and considered what he needed to do next. He glanced at the in-game clock and saw that it was growing late in the real world. However, it wasn't like he needed to get up for school tomorrow. He might as well see if he could find the dungeon

before Riley and Frank logged back in. That would save some time.

I probably need to go speak to William. He might have some information on the dungeon's location.

Jason beckoned to Alfred, and the pair exited the small house, making their way to William's residence. As they walked through the town, Jason saw that a celebration was in full swing. For a town that had been starving a few days ago, they sure had a decent stockpile of booze. As the pair neared the hill at the back of the town, Jason saw that the residents had lined up a dozen or so kegs around the small clearing. Music drifted through the night air and drunken zombies and skeletons danced with wild abandon.

It's a good thing I assigned my zombies to watch the walls. Nobody here seems to be in any condition to defend the town if it were attacked, Jason thought with amusement.

A smile lit his face as he watched the revelry. Jason had found a way to create something incredible from the ashes of this town's misfortune. Perhaps he had also made some progress towards redeeming himself for creating the problem in the first place. He was thankful that he was not forced to exercise his "Plan B." Every single one of the villagers had accepted the rite.

Alfred padded softly beside Jason as they made their way up the hill, leaving the revelers behind them. Alfred spoke softly, "Your Plan B was to kill everyone anyway. Both of your plans were the same."

Jason shook his head, a thoughtful look on his face. "Perhaps the result was the same, but I'll sleep better knowing that these people were given a choice."

This earned him a confused look from the cat.

When they arrived at William's house, Jason knocked tentatively at the door, which promptly swung open on its own. Inside he discovered that William and Patricia had also been partaking in the festivities. They sat at a round table on one end of the house with a few of the other townspeople. He assumed that Krista was off with the other undead children playing.

Jason watched William try to sink a ball in a cup on the other side of the table. The ball looked suspiciously like an eyeball, but Jason chose not to look too closely. It seemed that this gruesome drinking game had already made its way to Peccavi.

"Am I interrupting anything?" Jason asked in an amused voice.

"Not at all!" William replied, looking up at Jason with a smile. "You're the man of the hour. Pull up a seat." He kicked an empty chair beside him. As Jason took his seat, William's hand gestured at the other townspeople in the room. "These are the elders of our village. They form something like a council to govern the town."

The men and women watched Jason with a strange mixture of awe and respect. Jason's brow furrowed slightly. "I thought you were the mayor," he said.

William chuckled. "That I am. The council elects a mayor to handle the day-to-day management of the town. We learned a long time ago that it's easier to have one person handling most administrative decisions. They weigh in on the larger choices that the town needs to make."

One of the men at the table leaned towards Jason and said, "We have you to thank for our survival. We're indebted to you." The others at the table nodded solemnly.

Jason was happy with the result, but the means he had employed to conquer the village were strange. Apart from the small risk that the alien memory had posed, the images he had witnessed had an oddly spiritual vibe. In the memory, the act of sacrifice had been depicted as part of an individual's transcendence to another life. He wasn't certain that there was a formal religion at play, but it was easy to misconstrue the ceremony as religious.

Jason realized that a silence had descended over the room as his thoughts wandered. "I offered you a choice, and you chose to save yourselves," Jason explained.

Patricia spoke up from beside William, "It's just difficult not to sing your praises. You've given us back our hope. I mean, I'd rather that my heart was still beating, but the benefits of this new body are incredible."

"I've heard that before," Jason said, thinking of Jerry's reaction. "It's a tradeoff, but I think your village will be better for it. I also plan to call for reinforcements from the Twilight Throne soon. The soldiers should help fend off the attacks from the were-beasts."

He paused, collecting his thoughts before continuing. He decided to keep his true goal in coming here to himself for now. There was no sense tipping his hand this soon. However, he still needed to collect information on the nearby dungeon. "I actually came to Peccavi for another reason. I'm looking for a dungeon that is supposedly located near your town. Do you know anything about this?"

William's face became serious. "I think I may know the place you're talking about. I've had certain suspicions…" He trailed off, uncertain how to continue.

The others looked on with nervous expressions. Finally, William spoke again, "I don't have any proof, but I believe that the were-beasts have been coming from the ruins to the northwest. We have made several hunting trips into the mountains, and most of the attacks are usually reported when our hunters get too close to the

ruins."

He looked at Jason levelly. "I suspect that the missing villagers didn't leave. I think that they were taken. We must leave the town every so often for food and other supplies. Many of the people that go on these trips never come back, and their bodies haven't been discovered. You need to be careful if you plan to go to the ruins. If I'm right, something evil sleeps there," William said, his booming voice clouded with worry.

New Quest: Our Time of Ruin

After conquering Peccavi, the town's leader, William, revealed his suspicions that the ruins to the northwest of town have been claimed by an evil force (he was rather vague!). He believes that the were-beasts may have claimed this location. You're heading there anyway, so why not investigate?

Difficulty: A
Success: Investigate the ruins. Discover whether there is any truth to William's suspicions. Perhaps you can also discover what has happened to the missing villagers.
Failure: Unknown
Reward: Increased reputation with the townspeople of Peccavi. Other rewards unknown.

At least Alfred is finally acknowledging that these quest prompts are vague.

Jason turned back to William. "I'll be careful. I'm planning to take a small group up into the mountains tonight. Do you think you could mark the location on my map?" Jason asked hopefully. This was the first time he had the chance to ask an NPC to give him a quest location.

"Not a problem at all!" William replied. "Just pull up your map, and I will point to the location."

Wow. Is it that easy?

Jason opened his map interface. A window appeared in his field of view that showed the town of Peccavi. He could zoom out to see the surrounding area. The maps he had seen back at the Twilight Throne allowed him to fill in the topography of the land around the village, but the areas were currently grayed out. He assumed that this was because he hadn't explored the area himself. As he was looking at

the window, he noticed that there was a small button in the bottom right-hand corner that let him share the map. He pressed it.

A faint image appeared in the air before him, glowing a translucent blue. This was similar to how Pint had displayed a map back at the keep but much smaller and less detailed. This obviously wasn't an ability that was limited to the imp and Jason wondered idly whether all NPCs could do this.

His wandering thoughts were interrupted by William. "The dungeon is right here." The burly man pointed at a spot in a small valley between two nearby mountains. The location looked like it was only a couple hours from the town if Jason made the trip at a brisk jog. The location lit up as a red dot on Jason's map, but the area around it was still covered in a gray fog.

"Thanks, William," Jason said gratefully. "I'll go there this evening to check it out. I'll probably be back in a few hours. You all enjoy the festivities while I'm gone," he said with a grin.

"Will do!" William exclaimed, raising his mug in salute. "Try not to get yourself killed!"

Chuckling, Jason left the house. He made his way toward the village gate, Alfred in tow. He was going to need to leave behind some of his zombies to defend the village. Jason had noted that most of the townsfolk were low level. Even if they weren't drunk and partying, they were poorly equipped to defend themselves. He decided to leave his soldier zombies and mages, taking only the werewolves and the thieves with him. This way he could move quickly and quietly. The werewolves also had exceptional *Tracking* and *Perception* skills.

With a plan in place, Jason headed out of the village. His zombies firmly shut the gate behind his small party. He looked out at the dark hills that loomed around the village. He had a lot of work left to do this evening. He needed to get moving.

Jason had quickly discovered a trail that might have once been a full-fledged road. It appeared to be heading in the direction of the quest marker, and he decided to follow it towards his destination. As he traveled, the trail narrowed and soon became nothing more than a rough hunting trail, likely used by the villagers in better times. Within an hour, he was marching against a steep incline, and the trail began to wind back and forth up the side of the mountain.

As he scaled the mountain, the trees became more dense. Instead of the twisted and gnarled oaks of the forest around the Twilight Throne, the trees here had once been pines. Their trunks stood straight and tall, yet no leaves or needles adorned their branches.

A few hours later, Jason arrived at the rough location of the quest marker. He was currently crouched next to a large boulder that

looked down on a small valley nestled between two of the peaks. He could just barely make out the lights of Peccavi far below him through the tree cover. He had encountered no resistance on the trip to the ruins, but he had learned to be cautious. His werewolves were currently patrolling the area around him.

The ruins in front of him didn't look like much. Ancient stone blocks that might have once been the foundations of buildings were scattered through the valley. Based on the number of stone blocks, a thriving town must have once existed here. On the far end of the ruins, abutting the base of the mountain, was a large stone gate. Adjacent to the gate was a large lake, likely created by the runoff from the neighboring mountains. Jason had not moved close enough to inspect the gate carefully, but he assumed that this was the dungeon entrance that William had mentioned. He was curious whether this dungeon would be similar to the other games he'd played. AO certainly hadn't followed the typical video game mold so far.

His thoughts were interrupted by a rumbling voice behind him. "Death and mayhem. That is all that lies inside that gate. However, I doubt that will deter you from moving forward."

Jason turned and found the Old Man standing beside him, dressed in his usual attire – a black robe and hooded cape that masked his eyes. In his hand, he held his gnarled wood staff that had a wickedly sharp blade protruding from the top. Blood welled at the tip of the blade and dripped rhythmically to the ground.

"That's rather ominous," Jason replied with a chuckle. "It has been a while, but this seems like an odd place to have a chat."

"You're a busy man now that you have a city to run. I notice that you have added two other travelers to your group. This makes it difficult to catch you alone," the Old Man added in an irritable voice.

Jason nodded. He had been rather occupied lately. Interacting more, both with the NPCs in the Twilight Throne and with Riley and Frank, was taking up a substantial amount of his time. Not only that, but he wasn't used to explaining himself. For example, he wasn't looking forward to the conversation tomorrow regarding what happened in Peccavi. He expected some mixed reactions from his friends.

The Old Man must have been reading his mind. "By the way, congratulations on conquering Peccavi. Your approach brought back fond memories of times long past."

At the Old Man's words, Jason recalled the ancient memory he had witnessed. His thoughts also turned to his conversation with Morgan before he left the Twilight Throne. Perhaps the "keepers" she had mentioned were related to the ritual he had experienced. This was a connection he hadn't made earlier as he was struggling to digest

what had happened.

"Does the memory I saw have something to do with the keepers?" Jason asked curiously.

The Old Man chuckled. "Those are spoilers, boy."

Jason looked at him skeptically. "I realize you're going for vague and mysterious, but it wouldn't hurt for you to give me a straight answer occasionally."

"It's not by choice," the Old Man said, irritation coloring his voice. "I am limited in the information I can give you regarding this world. I am constrained by the rules that my siblings and I created."

Well, damn. First, the cat can't tell me anything, and now a god is using the same excuse. How the hell is a person supposed to figure out what is going on?

"Do you not have your own eyes and ears?" the Old Man asked in a derisive tone, reading Jason's thoughts. "Others are not obligated to hand you answers."

The Old Man paused for a moment, tapping his chin thoughtfully with a gnarled hand. "Perhaps I can gently push you in the right direction. Isn't there another question you wish to ask me?"

What is he talking about? Then the thought hit Jason like a truck, and he felt like smacking his head against the nearby boulder.

Jason's eyes turned back to the Old Man. "How do I go about learning new spells?"

The Old Man lips twisted into another smile. "Now that's a great question," he replied, sarcasm lacing his voice. "However, the answer is that you are not ready to advance further."

"What? Why not?" Jason asked. "Morgan said my level and affinity were high enough to learn additional spells."

The smile faded from the Old Man's face, and he snorted. "Morgan is merely a practitioner of my arts. You are speaking to a god, boy." Dark mana flared around the deity in pulsating waves. "You are overeager. To continue on the path of the dark, you need to grow stronger."

Jason hesitated. Perhaps he needed to be more careful in how he framed his questions. He needed the Old Man's assistance. Clearly, the god wasn't referring to raw levels or his dark affinity, which led Jason to his next question. "In what way do I need to grow?"

"You yearn for more strength. That's an admirable goal. You will certainly need it in the coming days. Yet, you now lead a city. As you saw in the vision in the village, the undead are more than strangers meeting in the dark. They are *kin*."

The Old Man paused and stared at Jason intently. "I can see you still don't understand," he said, sounding weary at Jason's constant need for an explanation. "To grow, you must learn to lean on

others. You are not an island unto yourself, boy. A leader is only as strong as those that follow him."

Jason's brow furrowed as his mind scrambled to process what the Old Man was saying. He was awash with questions after hearing this new information. "I'm not certain I understand," he hedged tentatively. "What exactly do I need to do?"

The Old Man sighed. "Perhaps it would be easier to show you. You travelers always need to have things handed to you in a neat package with a list of instructions. You are children who have not learned to stand on your own," he grumbled as he waved his hand in the air.

New Quest: Strength of Many

After another confusing conversation with the Old Man, he has offered you a quest that will presumably allow you to advance further in dark magic.

Difficulty: A

Success: Gather the following three ingredients:

1. Heart of a dungeon boss.
2. The Dark One's Grimoire.
3. Two willing sacrifices.

Failure: Unknown

Reward: Advancement in the Path of the Dark

I know I haven't been given any fetch quests so far, but this seems a bit extreme. I need to find willing sacrifices? Besides that, what is the Dark One's Grimoire?

"What happens when I collect all of the ingredients?" Jason asked uncertainly.

"Isn't the answer obvious?" the Old Man replied dryly. "You will gain more power. You will need it. I hear rumblings from the other gods. They are searching for their own avatars in this world."

Jason looked at the Old Man in alarm. "What do you mean by avatars?"

"Disciples of a god. What do you think you are? I have incurred the wrath of my siblings by pushing you along the path of darkness. They have now decided that they are entitled to select their own avatar in this world to maintain the balance of power," he snapped.

"You saw what happened when I meddled. What do you expect

to happen when the other deities become involved with the travelers, hmm?" The Old Man observed him carefully from under his dark hood as he asked this last question.

Jason could visualize what would happen. The books Morgan had discovered had alluded to it already. Soon there would be other cities like the Twilight Throne, and many new races would flood AO. Then those travelers and NPCs would likely be arrayed against him. This just made his goal of increasing the population of the Twilight Throne more urgent.

The Old Man was right, Jason needed to increase his own power – even if he was acting blindly. He might have gotten away with hit-and-run tactics against Alex, but those strategies wouldn't always work in the future. He would be dealing with more experienced players and against opponents with unknown abilities. He needed to become stronger.

"I see your point," Jason admitted. "I will accept your task."

Jason's eyes turned back to the ruins. He now had three immediate goals. He needed to find a way to solve his city's population problem, investigate the ruins to figure out why were-beasts were appearing near Peccavi, and find the heart of a dungeon boss. All signs pointed to this dungeon. The game may as well have riddled the valley with neon arrows pointing at the gate leading into the mountain.

He turned back to the Old Man, but the god had disappeared. Jason wondered idly if all the deities were this annoying. His eyes turned back to the lonely trail behind him. He had a long jog back to Peccavi. Then he needed to log off. Tomorrow he could regroup with Frank and Riley and head back to the dungeon entrance.

"Frank is finally going to get his wish," Jason murmured. "Tomorrow we're starting a dungeon crawl."

Chapter 12 - Well-Traveled

Rachel was walking the streets of Regalt, far south of the Twilight Throne. The sun had set a few hours ago in-game, and she was heading back to the inn to log out. She needed to get some sleep so that she wouldn't sleep through her shift at work in the morning. A frigid breeze swept through the street, causing her to shiver involuntarily. Even after reducing the sensitivity of her VR hardware and equipping thick furs, Rachel could still feel the biting cold.

In her hurry to get to the inn, Rachel didn't have a chance to admire the city. Regalt had been designed by the developers in imitation of Japanese architecture. Each structure was raised off the ground on wooden platforms. The majority of the houses were comprised of a single room, using movable, paper-thin panels to partition off separate areas. The most notable feature of the buildings, however, were the roofs. They were built with exceptional care. It showed in the way that the wooden frames curved in graceful arcs and terminated in points atop each structure. The wood paneling was then painstakingly decorated with filigree and ornate carvings.

Rachel entered an alleyway between two buildings – a shortcut she frequently used to return to the inn. After making it halfway down the alley, she heard a deep chuckle from behind her. "What do we have here? Are you lost, girl?"

Rachel spun, her eyes wide as she observed the player in front of her. He was wearing heavy chain armor and had a massive two-handed sword strapped to his back.

Her hand instinctively dropped to the sword at her hip. Player killers were common, even in the cities. The loot that players dropped upon death was a good incentive for murder. She halted as she felt cold metal press against the back of her neck.

"Tsk, tsk," the player in front of her said in a mocking tone. "I wouldn't do that, or my friend there would have to mar your pretty face."

The player behind Rachel grabbed her weapon, removing it from her scabbard with a scrape of metal. Worry bloomed in Rachel's chest. Why were they disarming her? They could just kill her and loot her corpse. She moved her hands to tap the logout button, but a hand clamped down on her wrist hard, preventing her movement.

The first player approached her at a casual pace. "Now you're trying to leave? That's a bit rude. We haven't even been acquainted yet," he said, a leer painted across his face. This man appeared to be leading the group of players.

“What do you want?” Rachel asked in a quavering voice as she watched the man approach.

The leader didn’t respond immediately. When he was an arm’s length away from Rachel, he reached out and caressed her face with his calloused hand. Another player bound her wrists behind her with thick ropes. “We just want to get acquainted. You’re the prettiest one we’ve found so far.”

Rachel’s worry escalated to full-blown panic as her heart raced. The ropes cut into her wrists as she tested the strength of the material. “What are you talking about? Let me go!”

The man before her smiled broadly, rubbing the rough stubble on his chin with one hand. “We just want to have some fun. Don’t worry, once you have met a member of the ‘Red Pack,’ you never go back.” He chuckled at his own sick joke.

The man’s innuendo was clear. Now desperate, Rachel tried to scream. A heavily gloved hand covered her mouth, cutting off her attempted yell. She struggled against the men holding her as despair curled in her stomach.

“You are violating the game’s terms of service,” a calm voice stated from farther down the alley.

The leader spun in surprise. As his eyes caught sight of the intruder, the look of shock disappeared. He laughed contemptuously. The newcomer that stood at the end of the alley was unassuming, cloaked in a plain mage’s robe and holding a crude staff in one hand.

“What of it?” the leader sneered. “Are you going to be this woman’s knight in shining armor?”

The mage replied evenly, “My name is Florius – I am a game master. If you do not desist, I am authorized to use force to subdue you. Understand that your account may also be banned.”

The leader laughed. “You? A game master? I have seen better equipment on scrub players. Go back to killing rabbits.” He turned away from Florius dismissively, his eyes crawling their way up Rachel’s body. Anticipation gleamed in his eyes.

The game master’s lips curled into a grin. “I was hoping you would say that.”

Fire wreathed his frame in an expanding circle, brightly illuminating the alleyway. The man’s free hand moved at lightning-speed as flames pooled at the top of his staff. The group had enough time to glance back at the game master before an explosion rocked the alley. The force of the blast destroyed everything in a 100-yard radius, leaving only rubble and smoldering flames. As the debris cleared, the game master stood unharmed amid the destruction. Molten shields peeled away from his body, their heat warping the air around him. His eyes surveyed the chaos with the same excited grin as he stood alone amid the burning ruin.

"I love it when they resist," he murmured. His gaze swept across Rachel's remains, and a frown creased his lips. "Such a shame. I suppose some casualties are unavoidable." With a few hand gestures and a flash of multicolored light, he disappeared.

* * *

Jason woke the next morning with a groan. Sunlight streamed through his window, shining directly in his eyes. He rolled over, pulling himself out of bed. A tap on his Core showed it was 10:00 am. He had a few hours until Frank and Riley would be out of class for the day.

He trudged to the bathroom, his feet heavy. He stretched, trying to relieve some of the stiffness in his arms and legs.

I need some coffee.

With that thought, Jason began his morning routine. After he stepped out of the shower and toweled off, he walked over to the sink. Studying himself in the mirror, he did a double-take. His hand pressed against his bicep, where muscle definition showed beneath the skin. Then his eyes moved to his chest and abs. He didn't look like an MMA fighter, but there was certainly more muscle than he remembered.

This is strange. It's not like I'm working out. I spend pretty much all day lying on my bed.

Yet he did remember many mornings where he had woken up feeling sore. He had chalked it up to lying motionless for hours, but maybe something else was going on here. He could always ask Alfred. The only problem was that he was a little afraid of the answer. He suspected that Freud-the-cat might be moonlighting as a physical trainer.

Well, I can't complain at the results, he thought as he inspected himself in the mirror.

With a shrug, Jason put on some clothes and made his way to the kitchen to make breakfast. He needed to eat and then take care of some chores – including the video footage from yesterday that he needed to edit. He wasn't certain that a village committing ritual suicide was what Robert had in mind when he had asked for "epic footage," but he would probably get a kick out of it. Jason could only imagine how Claire would react, let alone the news channels.

A few hours later, Jason had completed editing the video and sent it off to Robert and Claire. He had just received messages from Frank and Riley saying that they were out of class and had already reentered the game. Frank's exact words were, "Hurry the hell up. I

need lootz!"

Chuckling, Jason pulled the headset over his head and lay down on his bed. A moment later, he was sitting in the vacant hut on the edge of Peccavi. He lifted himself from the rickety bed and pulled open the door. The sky outside was now covered in boiling black clouds. For some reason, the sight was comforting.

Jason decided to regroup at William's home. That was probably where Frank and Riley would head first. As he walked through the town, he observed the townspeople after their night of revelry. The new undead were moving about the village in their normal routine. However, their steps seemed lighter than the day before, and their eyes were no longer clouded with desperation. They looked hopeful.

The town was also improved by the conversion to the dark. The buildings were more sturdy, and the walls surrounding the town had been fortified. Jason suspected some of the Old Man's influence. He might not be able to break the rules, but he didn't seem opposed to bending them in his favor.

The town, however, still had a long way to go. It needed real streets – not dusty trails. It also needed to be suitably garrisoned. Guard towers and siege equipment would eventually need to be built as well. If he was successful in his venture into the nearby dungeon, Jason expected that this town would become incredibly important. Its destruction would be a major setback to his growing civilization, and he needed to make certain that it was defended.

As he reached the mayor's home, Jason heard voices speaking within. He tapped on the wooden door and pushed it open. Inside, he found Frank and Riley sitting at a table with William and his wife. All eyes turned to Jason as he entered.

A squeaky voice broke the silence. "Meany pants here," Pint announced, poking Riley gently with his pitchfork.

Riley rolled her eyes. "Yes, I can see that, Pint. We're all looking at him."

"Just make sure," the imp replied in a disappointed voice.

Jason smiled at the imp. "Don't worry, Pint. I think I actually have a really important job for you." His eyes moved to the others. "But first I need to explain why we're really here. There is going to be a lot of work to do."

He pulled up a chair to the table and set about explaining the group's mission in coming to Peccavi. He had been reticent to disclose his mission the night before, but his walk through the converted town had made him realize that a lot of work needed to be done. For now, he would entrust William with his plan, and they could explain it to the village elders if they were successful. William's and Patricia's eyes widened as Jason explained his goal.

“You want to…what? You want to mine a dungeon for corpses?” William asked as Jason completed his story. A skeptical look was painted on the burly man’s face.

“Precisely,” Jason replied without hesitation. “And I want this town to become the conduit for transporting corpses back to the Twilight Throne. As I mentioned last night, I will be calling in reinforcements shortly. There will be approximately three divisions here within the next few days. This should give us nearly 200 soldiers. Until they arrive, I need for your people to focus on fortifying the town, improving the roads, building wagons to transport the bodies, and preparing the vacant homes to garrison the troops.”

William rubbed at his pale face. His brow was furrowed in thought. “This is doable,” he finally said. “We no longer need to eat or sleep, and we certainly have plenty of time to work.”

He grinned. “We also discovered that our new bodies have a remarkable amount of stamina. This applies to more than just manual labor. John took twenty shots of Randy’s moonshine last night.” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t suggest challenging him to a drinking competition.”

Jason smiled, having heard similar stories from the residents of the Twilight Throne. “I’ll keep that in mind. I’m glad that you think we can knock this out. For now, let’s keep our true goal between us. There’s no sense alarming the townspeople before we know what we’re facing in the dungeon.”

William frowned slightly but conceded to his reasoning. Jason continued, “We’re planning to travel to the dungeon today. I’ll leave ten of my zombies here so that you have some guards before our main forces arrive. They will be instructed to follow your commands. If you need to collect lumber or work on the roads outside the city, make certain that they accompany your people.”

William nodded and looked at Jason with respect. “Thank you. That will make it easier to convince the townsfolk to leave the safety of the walls.”

Pint stood up on Riley’s shoulder. “You forget me! What me do?” He jumped up and down excitedly.

Jason turned to the small imp with a grin. “I have an important task for you. I need you to teleport back to your rock, and tell Rex to send three divisions here as soon as possible. You should also come back with the troops.”

He leaned forward and handed a small scroll to the imp. He had instructions for Rex that he didn’t intend to share with the group. On top of that, he wasn’t certain that Pint could remember it all. “I need you to give this scroll to Rex.” Jason looked at the imp intently. “This is a big job. You also need to listen to Rex. Can you do this,

Pint?"

The imp held the scroll reverently and snapped to attention, giving Jason a military salute. "Pint can do. Pint good soldier."

Riley smiled at the imp. "Ahh, he's adorable." Pint blushed at this comment and stood a bit straighter.

Jason addressed him, "Well, soldier, get going." The imp saluted one more time and disappeared with a faint pop.

"Now that we have a plan in place, we need to get moving." Jason eyed Riley and Frank. "We have a lot of work to do."

The trip into the mountains was uneventful. The group marched forward in a thin line due to the narrow trails that wound up the side of the mountain. Jason and Riley walked side-by-side as Frank trudged far behind them. They could make out faint cursing as their large friend stumbled on the rocks that dotted the trail behind them.

The pair had walked in silence for quite some time, making only occasional small talk. Jason could tell that both Riley and Frank were alarmed at his actions the day before, and they had avoided talking about what happened. As they neared the valley entrance, Riley glanced at Jason out of the corner of her eye before speaking hesitantly, "I-I'm sorry about yesterday."

Jason looked at her in confusion. "What for?"

Riley frowned, her eyes on the ground in front of her. "I thought you were just going to kill the villagers. I should have trusted that you had a plan."

Chuckling slightly, Jason replied, "Well, technically I *did* kill them all."

A small smile tugged at Riley's lips. "But you gave them a choice. You tried to fix the damage you caused – even if it was an accident. I should have trusted you."

Riley hesitated before continuing, "Since what happened with Alex, it's just been so hard for me to open up. I keep thinking everyone I meet is somehow out to get me." She shook her head. "I know it's silly, but… I guess I just haven't gotten over it yet."

Her eyes lifted to meet Jason's, and they hardened with determination. "I enjoy traveling with you, and I want to be part of this team. I think that means I'm going to have to learn to trust you."

A pang of guilt swept through Jason. On the one hand, he was happy to see that Riley seemed to be aware of the trauma caused by her ordeal with Alex. On the other hand, Jason was still withholding information from his friends. She was inadvertently rubbing his face in the fact that he didn't trust her, or Frank, with his real plan.

For a moment, Jason considered telling her everything, but he hesitated. Despite what she had just said, would she and Frank really

follow him if they knew what he planned to do? More than likely, they would turn tail and run back to Peccavi. The bottom line was that he needed their help if he was going to complete the dungeon, and he couldn't risk scaring them away.

Nothing is easy in this game, Jason thought tiredly. *I just have too much at stake, both in this world and in the real one, to gamble on their reaction.*

"I want you to be part of the team too," Jason finally replied. "And I'm glad to see that you're starting to move past what that asshole did to you. I can't promise that the things I'll do in this game will always be easy, and they'll probably be morally gray at best, but I can promise that I'll try to do what's best for the Twilight Throne and its people."

Riley nodded, seemingly satisfied with his response.

That wasn't technically untrue, he thought. *My parents would probably be proud. I'm thinking like a lawyer!*

The group soon arrived at the ruins. Jason stood beside the boulder he had crouched behind the night before as his zombies milled around. He was down to fifty-five minions after leaving a token defensive force back in Peccavi. He could only hope that it was enough.

Jason's eyes surveyed the valley carefully. The ruins outside the stone gate were still barren of life, and nothing moved in the small valley. Frank came up behind Jason and Riley, huffing slightly.

"What you did in the village yesterday was crazy, but you know how I can tell you're a real psychopath?" He glared at Jason. "You made us jog up a mountain! Who does that?"

Jason chuckled. "We've played tons of video games where we ran everywhere at a slow sprint. It's a bit different when it's not just a character on a screen, isn't it?"

Riley slapped Frank on the shoulder, amusement dancing in her eyes. "You need to man up, Frank. Aren't you supposed to be our tank? What're you going to do when you're on the frontlines getting stabbed?" This earned her a glare too.

Jason saw a strange look flit across Frank's face as Riley turned her back to him. Frank looked worried. Jason had noticed his large friend's odd behavior during the trip. He had stayed near the rear of the group and glanced suspiciously at the forest as they traveled. Jason still didn't suspect foul play, but Frank was hiding something. Maybe he hadn't had the same experience playing AO that Jason had. He was beginning to wonder how Frank would fare in a real battle.

Speaking of which, there was one last thing Jason needed to do before they entered the dungeon. He just needed to distract Riley and Frank. "Why don't you two go inspect the entrance. Take some

zombies with you. I just need to reorganize my bag and respond to a few real-world messages before we enter the dungeon."

The pair accepted his excuse with a shrug and started down into the ruins. Jason watched their backs as they walked away, guilt throbbing in his chest with a dull ache. He hated to do this, but he didn't have a choice. He couldn't gamble on their reaction. Jason quickly brought up his in-game console and sent the message he had typed out that morning.

Alfred stood beside him, looking concerned. "If your reaction to my experiment was any indication, they are not going to be happy when they discover what you have done," he said in a serious voice. "I think you should be honest with them. You heard Riley – they both trust you."

Jason looked at the cat. Maybe he was right.

Or maybe the bottom line is that I don't trust them.

"I just can't risk it," Jason replied quietly. "Better to ask for forgiveness than permission."

"Another expression?" Alfred asked in a dry tone.

Jason smiled sadly. "Hey, you wanted to discover how the players think. Think of these expressions as mini-learning experiences." With that, Jason hurried down the trail leading into the ruins.

Alfred stared after him, a sad expression on his face. "I am certainly learning a lot," he said quietly.

Chapter 13 - Attempted

Robert stared at the screen that hovered over the control room. The display had been broken into four sections, each showing a scene of devastation. In one panel, a small village had been flooded by a nearby river, destroying the villagers' homes and spoiling their crops. Another scene showed a field of stone pillars, many covered in blood. The pillars obstructed a major road between two of the in-game cities.

Yet the worst catastrophe had occurred in Regalt. An enormous explosion had destroyed several city blocks. Little remained except for smoldering ruins. The damage to the city and its residents was so severe that many players bound to Regalt were forced to migrate to another city.

"I hate it when I'm right," Robert muttered.

"What is this?" Claire asked, exiting the elevator and stepping into the control room.

Robert grunted irritably, "It's the new game masters. They've responded to several reports issued by both the players and our own internal monitoring system." His hand waved at the screen. "This is their attempt at resolving those situations."

"Can we fix it?" Claire asked in shock. "Certainly, we could just rebuild Regalt."

"We can't," Robert replied evenly. "Alfred has frozen any administrator changes to the game environment, and he isn't responding to the overrides." A frown curled Robert's lips. "I bet he's trying to teach us a lesson. This was a stupid idea."

Robert continued, "What's worse is the player response. Here, see for yourself."

A few typed commands later, the screen changed. The ghastly scenes of destruction were replaced with the face of a reporter for Vermillion Live, the company's new streaming channel. The man was interviewing a representative of the CPSC, a young woman dressed in a matching pantsuit. A federal identification card clung to her blouse.

"Was this necessary?" the reporter asked in a skeptical voice as images of the carnage played out on the displays behind the stage.

The CPSC representative responded in a curt voice, "Yes. It was. In one instance, a girl was about to be raped. In another situation, players were torturing a young man, taking advantage of the VR hardware's pain feedback system. In every case, the offending players were warned and resisted the game master."

The reporter just shook his head. "I doubt anyone would question that those are terrible offenses, but the game masters have a significant

amount of power inside the game. Couldn't they have resolved the conflict without destroying a town or causing a flood? It just seems excessive…"

The woman eyed the reporter incredulously. "I doubt the victims feel that way."

As the woman spoke, a pop-up appeared on the screen. It showed poll data from the player base provided by Cerillion Entertainment. 77% of players indicated that the game master's behavior was excessive, 8% agreed with their actions, and 15% were uncertain.

"77%," Claire said softly. "This seems like a huge PR problem for us."

"Not for us," Robert replied. "Remember, the CPSC is the one administering the game masters. The board is planning to issue a statement later today explaining that any changes caused to the game world are permanent."

Claire frowned. "So they're setting up the CPSC to take the blame?"

* * *

The small group stood in front of the entrance to the dungeon. A massive stone arch towered over Jason, the rock cracked and pitted with age. Faded images were carved into the surface, depicting a short race that vaguely resembled dwarves. Jason peered into the gloom beyond the archway and his *Night Vision* struggled against the darkness of the hallway before him.

The werewolves made strange yipping sounds as they sniffed around the entryway and fresh footprints could be seen in the dirt outside the entrance. This was an active dungeon.

"The wolves have caught the scent of something," Frank said, a frown tugging at his lips.

"I wonder what's inside," Riley replied. "Look at these scratches." Her hand traced claw marks etched into the stone around the entrance. Deep grooves crisscrossed the rock, clearly made by something large. Surprisingly, Riley looked a bit excited, and dark mana began to pool in her eyes as she gazed at the stone.

I'm probably having a bad influence on her.

"I doubt anything good lives in there," Frank said quietly. Jason noted that his friend stood well back from the entrance, a worried expression on his face. This wasn't quite the reaction he'd expected since Frank was the one who had been pushing them to explore a dungeon.

"I guess there's only one way to find out," Jason replied nonchalantly, summoning his own mana to help tamp down on his

quickening heartbeat. Despite his own bravado, walking into a pitch-black hallway that might be occupied by a host of were-creatures was a bit worrisome. He stepped across the stone threshold and was immediately confronted with a prompt.

System Message: Entering Unknown Dungeon

This dungeon is designated as a "raid-level" encounter. Ten or more players are recommended to successfully complete this dungeon.

A two-week reset timer (in-game time) will apply to this dungeon. Any players who die inside the dungeon will respawn at the entrance within 45 minutes in-game time.

This means we have four to five days real-world time to complete this dungeon. I hope that's long enough.

Riley and Frank followed him inside with his entourage of zombies. The group made their way forward cautiously. Stone walls towered over the group on either side, and phosphorescent vines grew along the stone, creating a lattice-like web above them. The vines glowed faintly, but the light wasn't sufficient to illuminate the hall. Without their enhanced vision, the group would be nearly blind. After walking a few hundred yards, the hallway branched off in three directions. Jason looked at the other halls with a frown.

"It's a maze," he muttered.

This might affect my ability to farm this dungeon. I need an area with high monster density. Hopefully, there are other areas or levels to this dungeon.

Riley sighed beside him. "I guess we'll be exploring aimlessly again, huh?" she asked, referring to their investigation of the dark keep.

"Except there will be creatures in here more dangerous than Pint," Jason replied in a resigned tone. "We're going to have to map it out slowly. I discovered that you can share your map with other people last night. I'll just keep careful track of each hallway we take."

"Well, let's get to it then. Future loot awaits us!" Frank said with forced bravado, yet he made no move to lead the group down one of the halls.

With a confused glance at his friend, Jason chose the hallway on the left, and the group continued forward. As a precaution, a few werewolves scouted nearly a dozen yards ahead of the group. After a

few minutes, Jason heard a 'whooshing' sound from farther down the hallway. Advancing quickly, the group discovered that one of the werewolves had been destroyed by streams of acid spewed from hidden nozzles in the walls. The green substance clung to the werewolf's fur, melting the decayed skin and bone at a rapid rate. The group froze instantly.

"Pressure plate?" Frank called out softly, unsure of what had just happened.

"I don't know…" Jason trailed off as he examined the floor closely. After a moment, a faint blue outline appeared as his *Perception* skill triggered, revealing a barely perceptible tripwire. The threads hung loosely along the floor.

"It was a tripwire," Jason said, gesturing to the thread. "It's deactivated now, but we need to be more careful going forward. I doubt this is the last trap."

Riley looked thoughtful. "Doesn't this mean that there is someone here?" She stooped to look at the wire. "There's no dust on this. It looks like it was put in place recently."

Jason was a bit surprised by her observation. Only humanoid creatures would be able to set traps. It was one of those things that required opposable thumbs. "Well, that's probably a good thing," he replied. "Maybe this dungeon will be suitable for our purposes after all."

Another thought occurred to Jason. "That also means we need to be quiet. There might be creatures in this maze." Frank and Riley both nodded soberly.

Jason glanced sourly at the remains of the werewolf zombie. The acid had destroyed both the flesh and bones, leaving nothing for Jason to re-summon. Having both *Specialized Zombie* and *Custom Skeleton* meant he could use most corpses twice unless the bodies were destroyed beyond redemption. Unfortunately, he hadn't been lucky this time.

Jason assigned the werewolves to take point in ferreting out the remaining traps. Their high *Perception* skill made them the wisest choice, and they were expendable. As they discovered pressure plates and tripwires, the group was forced to come up with "clever" ways to trip the traps from a safe distance. Most of those plans involved throwing small stones at the trigger points until they activated.

After an hour of moving quietly through the maze, Frank cried out as his shin struck a large stone embedded in the floor. The halls were poorly lit and his *Night Vision* wasn't sufficient to make out all of the loose rubble. Frank toppled forward, dropping his sword in the process. The sound of the metal sword striking the stone floor sent a loud echo reverberating down the hallway. The werewolves' noses

immediately perked up, and they let out a yipping sound. Their eyes turned to the tunnel behind the group as they shrank back against the wall.

"There's something coming," Jason warned, his voice echoing slightly in the tunnel.

Damn it, Frank.

Jason didn't have time to berate his friend. He grabbed Frank's hand and quickly helped him to his feet. He ordered the undead to form lines facing the tunnel they had just walked down. His melee troops manned the front line, and his mages and archers stood behind them. Nearly forty undead stood in his formation.

Jason didn't have a clever plan for dealing with whatever was coming. He wasn't certain what type of creature they would face, and they were stuck in this hallway. Retreating farther down the hallway was a risk since it was unexplored. Jason didn't want to accidentally draw the attention of more enemies or trigger a trap.

Frank brushed himself off with an embarrassed expression and took his place on the front lines. He pulled a massive tower shield and a longsword from his bag. "Time for me to earn my keep," he said with a grin.

Despite his cocky attitude, Jason noticed that his friend's hands were trembling. This was probably the first significant battle Frank had been involved in. Jason could only hope that he wouldn't crack under pressure. Battles in AO were much different than in traditional point-and-click games.

I suppose it's better for Frank to face a real fight now rather than on a dungeon boss.

A loud thumping sound came from the end of the tunnel, causing the floor to tremble beneath their feet. A roar erupted from the end of the tunnel as whatever creatures were stalking them raced down the hallway. The thumping began to increase in both frequency and intensity. Jason's heart beat frantically in time with the rhythmic vibration, and he summoned his dark mana, abandoning himself to the numbing chill.

Three creatures finally appeared from the encroaching darkness. They stood nearly ten feet tall. They had the head of a bull but walked on two hooved feet. Their bodies were covered in a thick, matted brown fur. Spiraling horns jutted from their foreheads, framing their red, rage-filled eyes and they each carried enormous two-handed battleaxes.

Jason inspected them quickly.

Level 141. Oh, crap.

"Fuck me," Frank muttered as he took a hesitant step back. "They're freaking minotaurs!" He glanced at his tower shield

skeptically and quickly swapped it out for his two-handed sword. He apparently didn't trust the shield to hold up against the massive axes the minotaurs were holding.

It took several long moments before the creatures' eyes focused on the enemy force. However, once they noticed the group, the beasts let out a rage-filled roar and sped up further. The hallway was slightly too narrow for all three beasts to move side-by-side and they jostled each other as they charged forward. The bulls occasionally slammed hard into the walls on either side of the hallway, enraging them even more.

As they neared, the first two minotaurs swung their axes back, using their momentum to increase the force of their initial charge. Jason frantically cast *Curse of Weakness* as quickly as he could, trying vainly to slow the creatures. He glanced to his side and saw Riley calmly firing arrow after arrow in the onrushing beasts.

Then the beasts struck the front lines.

Their axe blades cut a huge swath in Jason's troops, slicing several zombies in half. The minotaurs fought with wild abandon, ignoring blows from the undead as they swung their axes in enormous arcs. Although they didn't wear armor, their thick fur made it difficult to land a solid strike. Swords easily became tangled in the matted hair. They let out bellowing roars as they trampled the zombies under their hooves.

Jason ordered his melee troops to aim for the beasts' legs. Maybe he could cripple them and get them on the ground. This would at least take their axes out of commission. That was his only option since there wasn't room to use *Corpse Explosion* effectively without hitting his own teammates.

Fireballs, bolts of ice, and rays of darkness shot over the heads of Jason's minions as his mages entered the fray. Riley's bow hummed as she released a continuous stream of arrows from where she stood beside Jason. One of her shots struck true, impaling one of the beasts' eyes. The minotaur let out a roar of agony. A thief took advantage of its momentary weakness, severing the tendons in the creature's legs. The minotaur toppled and was quickly slain in a flurry of blades and blood.

The fight with the other two minotaurs wasn't going as well. One of the beasts had squared off against Frank, who struggled to parry or dodge the beast's blows. Even after designing his character as a warrior, Frank could barely block the minotaur's titanic strikes – forcing him to merely deflect the beast's blows. Each strike of the enemy's axe let out a ringing metallic crash. It was clear that Frank was quickly losing the battle as the axe blade nicked him several times.

Meanwhile, the other minotaur was laying waste to Jason's zombies. Most of the melee troops had already been destroyed, leaving the casters and archers largely unprotected. Jason hesitated as he watched the fight unfold, not certain what to do. If he focused on the minotaur attacking his troops, he could protect his more fragile ranged minions, and he would likely have sufficient remaining minions to take on the other minotaur. However, Frank would probably die in the process.

Riley glanced at Jason who stood unmoving beside her, following his gaze as it bounced between his minions and Frank. She screamed at him over the din of the battle, "Make a decision! Now!"

Shaking himself, Jason ordered his troops to focus on the minotaur attacking the ranged troops. Then Jason raised the minotaur they had managed to slay and ordered it to protect his remaining minions. Even immersed in the anesthetic sensation of his dark mana, he could feel guilt flood his mind. He could only hope that Frank would last long enough to take down the second minotaur.

Jason turned back to the duel between Frank and the other minotaur, his hands starting to move through the process of casting *Curse of Weakness*. Maybe he could buy Frank a little more time while his minions grappled with the second beast.

Sweat poured down Frank's face, and his breath came in ragged gasps. His armor was torn in several places, the steel rings of his mail hanging loosely from his bulky form. Blood seeped from the gashes and stained the dark-gray metal red. Frank dodged to the left, but his heavy armor impeded his movements. The creature's axe glanced off Frank's shoulder, sending a shower of blood and metal rings in all directions.

The minotaur roared in rage, one hand releasing the hilt of his axe. The creature stepped forward and grabbed Frank by the neck as he was still reeling from the glancing blow he had suffered. The beast lifted him into the air as Frank's sword tumbled from his grasp. He tried vainly to peel the creature's hands from his neck. The minotaur then slammed Frank's body against the wall, and he crumpled to the floor.

Jason could see his friend's eyes staring at him, filled with fear and desperation. As though in slow motion, he watched as Frank's mouth moved, forming silent words that were consumed in the fury of the battle. A shadow fell over Frank's face, and Jason glanced up in time to see the minotaur's blade cleaving through the air. Jason reached a feeble hand forward, shouting desperately – but he was too late.

Frank's head was neatly separated from his shoulders and rolled forward to rest a few feet away from Jason. Frank's lifeless eyes

seemed to stare at him accusingly. “You let me die,” they said.

Chapter 14 - Recovered

Alexion walked through the streets of Grey Keep. The sun beat down on the heavy cloak he wore to obscure his face and clothing. Over the last few days, word of his sermon and his healing abilities had spread like wildfire. He had started traveling with his face covered since he was continuously accosted by townsfolk begging for his help. They were riddled with all manner of illnesses and injuries that he had neither the patience nor the time to deal with. As a representative of the Lady, he couldn't just brush them aside – he had an image to maintain.

Today he was on a mission. Two days had passed in-game since his sermon in the temple. He was interested in observing the effect of his words on the residents of the city. He had hoped to spread dissent against the nobles and Strouse. He could then use that discord to grow his power and influence within the city.

As he walked through the market, Alexion listened carefully to the conversations of the NPCs. After a few minutes, he overheard several people talking in front of a tanner's stall. "This Alexion speaks the word of the Lady," one woman said fervently. "He's not a charlatan. I saw him open the golden book with my own eyes!"

The gruff man beside her snorted. "A little bit of magic to fool the masses. That doesn't mean he's the champion of a goddess."

The woman looked at him incredulously. "At least he offers hope and the Lady's protection. What is Strouse doing for our city? The undead plague our lands from the east and kill our troops, and he merely sits and waits. Meanwhile, Alexion heals the people of the city and encourages us to defend ourselves. Through him, the Lady offers us a way to fight back against the darkness!"

The couple's argument had drawn a small crowd, and Alexion withdrew before he was spotted. Behind him, he could hear shouting as the argument swiftly escalated. His plans were proceeding smoothly. The dissent hadn't yet grown to a fever pitch. He needed something to tip it over the edge.

As he mulled over this problem, his feet automatically took him back to the temple district. He soon found himself standing outside the Lady's temple. Despite the growing popularity of the Lady, the stone was still covered in dirt and muck. The copper statues that dotted the temple walls were tarnished, their faces obscured behind a film of corrosion.

On a whim, Alexion entered the structure. He didn't expect much foot traffic during the middle of the day. His feet padded softly over the cold marble of the temple floor as he meandered among the columns.

Suddenly, voices echoed through the hall. Not wanting to be seen, Alexion swiftly stepped behind a pillar. He was no longer on pleasant terms with the head priest and wasn't certain what would happen if the fat fool confronted him.

Two lower priests dressed in plain white robes walked through the temple. They carried buckets of water and mops. "I hate this job," one muttered angrily. "I doubt that the head priest has ever cleaned the crypts himself."

The other priest chuckled dryly. "Are you kidding? Those soft hands have never known a day's labor. The priest has his family to thank for his appointment – it certainly isn't his conviction of spirit."

The two grumbling men quickly moved to a door on the wall behind the altar. They opened the portal and slipped through. One of the men banged his bucket against the doorframe, causing water to splash on the floor. With a decidedly unpriestly series of curses, the two disappeared through the door. From his vantage point, Alexion could make out a narrow stairwell.

He hadn't realized that the temple had its own crypt. A glimmer of a plan was starting to form in his mind. Perhaps there was a way he could quickly bring the dissent to a boil. Yet the insidious whisper was mysteriously silent, which gave him pause. An unknown sensation swept over him. It felt like a hole in his chest that he couldn't quite fill. He thought about what his plan might mean if it was successful – the destruction of a city and the death of many of the city's NPCs. For a moment, he considered forsaking his strategy – perhaps abandoning Grey Keep altogether.

He leaned heavily against the column behind him, closing his eyes and fleeing to the hollowness that lingered in the back of his mind. The void immediately snuffed out the alien sensation. Alexion couldn't afford to be weak now. He had a mission. The sinister whisper soon returned, thrumming in approval as he contemplated his next steps.

* * *

After Frank died, Jason and Riley barely managed to kill the remaining two minotaurs. The losses had been severe. The beasts had slain all of Jason's soldier zombies and half of his werewolves. The remains of the minotaur Jason had hastily summoned during the battle also lay on the floor of the maze, its limbs crushed and broken from repeated blows. To make matters worse, his zombies' bodies had been destroyed, making it impossible to re-summon them as skeletons.

The only saving grace from the fight was that Jason was able to

raise the remaining two minotaurs. The behemoths were both level 141 after taking into account the level cap on Jason's zombies. That would at least make the future battles a bit easier.

After nearly an hour, Jason and Riley had almost made their way back to the entrance to the dungeon. They moved as quietly as possible, not wanting to confront another group of minotaurs unprepared. Jason kept his remaining werewolves on high alert. At least during their first attempt, Jason had managed to carefully map the hallways they explored so they weren't forced to wander aimlessly.

When they arrived back at the entrance, they saw Frank sitting with his back against one of the maze walls. They approached slowly. His head was bowed, and his eyes were closed. They weren't certain what to expect after his rather violent death. That fight had certainly been enough to traumatize most people.

Once they were a few feet away, Jason cleared his throat hesitantly. "Hey, Frank. You okay?"

Frank didn't respond for a long moment, and then he slowly looked up at the pair. Surprisingly, Frank's eyes didn't look as haunted as Jason had anticipated. He simply looked thoughtful. Alfred padded up to Frank quietly and rubbed himself against his leg. Frank lifted a hand and idly stroked the cat. Jason watched the scene, feeling a bit conflicted. He knew that Alfred technically controlled all of the NPCs, but it was odd to watch Frank pet the cat nonetheless.

"It's strange," Frank said softly. "That was the first time I've died." He looked at Jason and Riley. "Have you died in-game before?"

They both shook their heads. "Then you don't know. The game forces you to stand there and watch your death. It looks so real. You can actually walk around the area and examine the scene from different angles."

Jason and Riley stared at him in shock. This was the first that they had heard of a "death replay." They weren't certain what to say. What would it be like to experience your death over and over for nearly an hour?

Frank continued in a subdued voice, "I was pissed at you, man." He glanced at Jason, but his eyes didn't hold any anger. "I know you deliberately chose not to help me. I watched you do it over and over again."

He lapsed into a momentary silence, shaking his head slightly. "However, by the twentieth replay, my anger had started to fade. I could see where you were coming from. You made a choice. If you had saved me, you would likely have lost all of your minions, and both you and Riley would have probably died too."

He looked up at Jason, his face unusually somber. "I could even

see the moment you realized that you couldn't save me and also win the fight. You hesitated. Then you chose the path that led to victory. You're one cold bastard, but I can't see a better decision."

Frank rose slowly to his feet. Jason and Riley were still staring at him, not certain how to respond. Frank looked at Jason and then sighed. "After forty-five minutes of watching myself die, it's clear to me that I'm the weak link here. I don't have my class yet, and I'm only level 76. I was expendable." He shook his head, his eyes drifting to the floor. Despite his claims that he had gotten over the battle, a faint trace of fear lingered in his eyes as they hovered over the zombie minotaurs behind Jason.

Jason finally interjected, "I'm sorry about the choice I made. Like you said, it was the option that won the fight and left us with sufficient troops to keep going." Jason hesitated for a moment before adding, "That didn't make it any easier."

He cleared his throat and continued, "However, you aren't the weak link. This game doesn't reward players for raw strength or levels. The bottom line was that we didn't know what we were fighting or how to prepare for the battle. We do now. We just need a plan."

Riley walked up to Frank, patting his shoulder gently. "That was a rough fight for everybody. Like Jason said, we just need to come up with a strategy. Knowing him, it will probably involve him hiding in a corner while we do the real work." She grinned at this and Frank chuckled softly in response.

She then turned to Jason. "Well, what do you suggest we do, O' Lord of Darkness? Those minotaurs were tough."

Jason nodded as he rubbed his chin with one hand. "Yeah, they were. But I noticed something interesting after examining the skills of the minotaurs I summoned after the battle." He motioned to the zombies that stood nearby. "They have high skill levels in both *Listening* and *Tracking*. I think the sound of Frank tripping is what alerted them to our presence."

Frank grimaced at being reminded of how he had screwed up. Then a thoughtful look crossed his face. "I also think they're nearly blind," Frank said. "After watching the battle a few times, I noticed that they didn't actually focus on us until they were pretty close."

"Hmm, that's interesting," Jason replied. "If that's the case, then what's the deal with the traps…" He trailed off, lost in thought as he paced around the entrance to the maze. Frank and Riley stared at Jason with confused expressions.

"What do you mean?" Frank finally asked.

"The traps don't make any sense, do they?" Jason continued. "We know that the minotaurs have great hearing and, as you said,

terrible eyesight. It didn't seem like they triggered any traps? How do they avoid them as they navigate the maze?" Riley and Frank watched him with puzzled looks.

Riley finally spoke up, a surprised expression on her face. "The only explanation is that the minotaurs are somehow working with whoever is occupying the maze. That would explain how they know where the traps are in the first place."

"Exactly!" Jason said, stopping and staring intently at the pair. "Not only that, but the minotaurs must have the maze memorized. That's the only way a group of nearly blind bulls could navigate the maze without tripping the traps."

Frank looked at the zombie minotaurs that stood nearby. The doubt and self-recrimination were starting to fade from his face. "So these zombies must know the maze. If that's the case, they could help us plan an ambush." Frank's mouth curled into a grin. "Now this is the Jason I remember!"

Riley nodded as she followed their reasoning, but a small frown tugged at her lips. "Couldn't we just use the zombie minotaurs to take out the next group? That seems more straightforward."

"We could," Jason agreed, "but we don't know how many minotaurs are in the maze. This time, we were attacked by three. What if next time it's six? Or ten? What if they attack from two directions? If they are alerted to sound, then we're probably lucky the fight didn't attract more."

Jason tapped his lips with his fingers. "What we need to do is draw a large number of the beasts to one location and ambush them. If we set up a proper trap, we could take out most of the minotaurs in the maze in one fell swoop. Even if we don't kill them all, this should provide enough corpses to handle the remaining fights."

"Okay, okay. I see your point," Riley replied, shaking her head. "Well, let's say we ambush them. How are we going to kill them? They're still a pain to take down."

Jason grinned evilly. "I think I might have an idea for how to handle that." He motioned the pair closer and began drawing a crude map in the dirt with his finger.

It took several hours for the group to arrange the ambush. First, they had to find a section of the maze that terminated in a dead end. It also needed to have several hallways adjacent to it. They did this by projecting an incomplete map of the maze into the air and having one of the zombie minotaurs point to an area of the map that met their specifications. Luckily, the ambush location was relatively close to the entrance to the maze.

Riley then carefully scouted the portion of the maze identified by the zombie minotaur. They decided her *Dexterity* skill made her

both the most nimble and quietest person in the group. She took one of the werewolves with her to find the traps and alert her to any approaching minotaurs.

In the meantime, Jason and Frank took the other zombies back to the trail entering the valley. Their mission was to cut down a few dozen trees and haul them to the entrance of the maze. The minotaurs made this task relatively simple since they could fell a tree in a few blows. Jason then ordered his minions to haul the timber back to the entrance to the maze and chop most of the trunks into manageable pieces.

Once Riley reported that she had found the ambush site, she led a separate group of zombies carrying the lumber to the ambush location. In short order, there was a rather sophisticated assembly line in place. After a couple hours, the ambush location was lined with wood, and the trap was set.

The group was now huddled in another dead-end hallway adjacent to the ambush location. They were waiting to spring the trap. Riley sighed quietly as they sat there in the dark trying not to make any noise. Jason raised an eyebrow at her in response.

“I called it. We’re hiding in a corner again,” Riley whispered softly, a small smile curling her lips.

Jason grinned back. “Would you rather take them head-on?” He glanced at Frank suggestively.

She groaned softly, and Frank smiled at her. “Come on, Riley. Be patient. We don’t want to get in over our heads!”

“Okay. You guys can stop now,” Riley said in a pained voice.

The group quieted as they heard a thumping sound echoing down the hallways. The ground beneath them also began to tremble slightly. After a moment, they could hear roars reverberate off the stone walls leading to the ambush location.

“This is it,” Jason whispered. “Get ready. Remember, don’t let them out of the kill zone.”

Jason edged up to the corner of the hallway where his group was hidden, along with the remainder of his zombies. He saw small dark forms dart down each of the hallways leading to the ambush location. His orders to the bait zombies had been clear – make lots of noise and then haul ass back to the ambush site. Yet when Jason witnessed the mass of minotaurs following each of the zombies, he did a double take. There must have been at least thirty of the beasts charging down the hallways.

For a moment, Jason briefly considered giving up – this was more than he had been expecting. He could feel his pulse speed up, and his fists clenched reflexively. Images of his brutal death flitted through his mind. Then he forcefully shook himself, summoning his

dark mana. The chill power curled and coiled in his skull, soothing his anxiety.

Screw it. Worst-case scenario, we all die epically and start over.

The horde of minotaurs thundered past and into the dead-end hallway. The bait zombies weren't coming back out of that hallway, but their loss wouldn't be in vain. As he saw the last of the minotaurs charge into the ambush location, Jason turned to his group. "Go, go, go!" he ordered. The group charged forward into the entrance to the ambush hallway.

The zombie minotaurs lugged the makeshift blockade that they had constructed and began hastily setting it up with the support of Jason's human zombies. The entrance to the hallway was only ten feet across, and the blockade nearly filled the length of the hallway.

As luck would have it, one of Jason's remaining zombie soldiers had the *Woodworking* skill. Now that Jason was Intermediate in *Summoning Mastery*, he had been able to take advantage of the zombie's trade skill to have him craft a blockade. The structure they had created was simplistic. It was basically a wooden stand that held a row of makeshift spears constructed from the trunks of the pines in the valley outside the dungeon. The group had dug a shallow trench in the floor at the entrance to the hallway, made possible by the thick layer of dirt that covered the original stone floor of the maze. The butt of the spears rested in this trench and leaned against the fortified stand facing the hallway.

The two minotaurs stood behind this makeshift structure on a support beam attached to the blockade. This added the minotaurs' weight to the blockade and would hopefully keep it in place when the bulls in the hallway began to rush back out. The minotaur zombies also each carried their own roughshod spears, their points facing the hallway.

Once the blockade was in place, Jason ordered his mages into action. "Fire mages!" he yelled as the archers and mages lined up behind the zombie minotaurs. Fireballs flew through the air, striking the heaps of wood that had been carefully staggered along the length of the hallway. Jason grimaced as he saw the occasional missile splash against the horde of minotaurs. Firewalls then erupted at regular intervals along the hall.

Tortured screams filled the air as the first of the bulls was ignited by the flames. A blazing inferno raged in the hallway, the fire spreading to the beasts that were crammed into the narrow space. The matted hair that covered their bodies acted as kindling, igniting the beasts into ten-foot tall pillars of flame. Fire from the wooden piles crawled up the vines hanging from the walls and engulfed the lattice hanging over the hall. The flames were intense, and Jason took a

tentative step backward as he was struck by the almost palpable wall of heat.

The first of the minotaurs came to their senses and turned, trying to flee out of the entrance to the hallway. They charged headlong into the waiting spears of the blockade and Jason's minotaur zombies. The makeshift bulwark trembled and shook, but it held. Jason's minotaurs stumbled backward slightly from the force of the charge – their spear tips impaling more than one beast. The muscles in their arms bulged as they tried vainly to stop the onrushing bulls.

"Archers, fire!" Jason screamed over the chaos. A rapid-fire series of twangs filled the air as streams of arrows pelted the burning beasts in the hallway. With the roaring flames and smoke filling the hallway, it was difficult to tell where the arrows struck. However, the ranged attack served to escalate the chaos since many of the beasts were blinded by the fire and smoke. The combination of pain and the loss of their senses caused small fights to break out among the burning creatures.

After several long minutes, the fight was over. The group could no longer see through the burning torrent of flames or the smoke that filled the hallway, and they also couldn't hear any sound beyond the roar of the flames. Jason covered his mouth with his cloak to block out the thick black smoke and waved at the fire mages. They stopped channeling their firewall spell, and the flames slowly began to shrink.

As the fire and smoke began to clear, the group gazed at the scene with their mouths agape. The destruction was incredible. Heaping piles of corpses lay along the hallway, many still smoldering. The stench of burnt flesh and hair was almost overwhelming even with the dampened sense of smell in-game.

Coming to his senses faster than the others, Frank nudged Riley. "So, are you in the mood for some barbecue?"

Riley shook herself and looked at him with an irritated expression. "That was terrible," she muttered.

Frank put up his hands defensively. "Hey, don't glare at me. I'm allowed to joke. One of these assholes chopped my head off, remember?"

Alfred padded through the bodies, inspecting them and recoiling in disgust. He looked back at Jason with an accusing expression that seemed to say, "Again? Really?" Jason couldn't help but chuckle. Knowing now that he was looking at the game's AI, he couldn't help but wonder how much of Onyx's personality had actually been colored by Alfred's own reactions.

Jason was surprised at how effective the strategy had been. Similar to his previous battles, he had taken advantage of the element of surprise and the ensuing chaos to conquer a much stronger foe. His

eyes gleamed darkly as he observed the line of corpses. These new troops would allow them to conquer the maze more quickly.

Which is a blessing. We need to move faster. Riley and Frank will need to log off soon and we likely only have a few days left to finish this dungeon. He could only hope that he hadn't doomed them with the hasty message he had sent before they entered the maze.

Jason then turned his attention to his system messages.

x7 Level Up!
You have (45) undistributed stat points.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Leadership
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: Minions and subjects will receive a 6% increased learning speed for skills.
Effect 2: Increased reputation with NPC commanders and leaders.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Specialized Zombie
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2
Effect 1: Increased skill proficiency retained by zombies. Skill cap Intermediate Level 2.
Effect 2: Zombies may now retain trade skills. Skill cap Beginner Level 2.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Tactician
Skill Level: Beginner Level 9
Effect: 13% increased damage multiplier for a successful ambush or strategy (Currently, Damage x 1.13).

Finally! There's nothing like massacring a few dozen cows to get some levels!

Jason glanced over at Riley and Frank, who were pawing at the air. He grinned. "So how did we do? You guys gain a couple levels?"

Frank glanced over at him with an incredulous expression. "Are you kidding? I gained fifteen levels from that. No wonder you level so fast!"

Riley nodded in agreement. "I know, right? It feels like he might be cheating. If I hadn't watched him spend hours cutting down trees and planning this trap, I'd say his class was overpowered."

"What can I say? This game doesn't reward you for playing the hero and charging headlong into battle." Jason rubbed his hands

together gleefully as he surveyed the minotaur corpses. He had some new minions to raise and then they needed to clear the rest of this maze. He expected that there would be something interesting waiting at the end.

Chapter 15 - Avenged

After the massacre of the minotaurs, Frank logged off for the evening. He woke in his bedroom and lifted the heavy plastic helmet from his head. As usual, it took his body a moment to remember how to function in the real world. His muscles felt stiff and unwieldy. After a few minutes, he managed to muster the willpower to push himself upright, and his eyes surveyed his darkened room.

"Lights on," Frank called out. A dim glow illuminated the room, slowly increasing in intensity to avoid blinding him with an immediate flash of light. Just one more perk of his parents' money.

He looked around his bedroom. It was lavishly furnished with expensive, sleek furniture and all the modern technological amenities. His parents had even briefly discussed installing a residential AI to operate the house. They didn't really need an artificial butler to set their alarm clocks and regulate the thermostat, but he expected this was what happened when you ran out of things to buy.

Frank stood and made his way out of the room. As he lumbered down the hallway to the kitchen, the wooden floor creaked under his weight. He hated that sound.

"Coming out of your cave, huh?" a snide voice asked from behind him. Frank paused and closed his eyes, willing himself to be patient. "I heard bears are supposed to hibernate all winter."

"I'm not in the mood, Rebecca," Frank said softly, struggling to control the anger that welled in his chest. He continued his slow plod toward the kitchen without turning. He knew his younger sister was still standing behind him. He could just imagine the smirk on her perfect face as she watched his ponderous footsteps.

Rebecca snorted indelicately. "Well, then I'll leave you to your latest feast." He heard a door click shut behind him.

Frank knew he wasn't supposed to hate his siblings, but he did. His eyes glanced at the picture frames that hung along the hallway. Instead of the pictures featured in most houses, these frames showcased awards. They weren't his, of course. They belonged to his brother and sister. First prize in Math. First prize in Gymnastics. First prize in damn-near-everything.

Frank made his way into the kitchen, grabbing a tub of ice cream from the freezer. He was certain his mother had purchased another set of "diet-friendly" meals for him, but he was feeling depressed. He sat at the kitchen island, turning on the wall display with a quick command.

The screen jumped immediately to a reporter for Vermillion Live who was covering the events in Peccavi. The house's network had saved

Frank's preferences and recognized him by his voice. The display behind the reporter showed Jason's dark-robed figure standing atop a hill, blood running down the cracked earth in small rivers.

Frank envied his friend. He had changed so much in such a short time. Only a few weeks had passed since the release of AO, but, in that time, Jason had turned into a calculating, unapologetic man that took what he wanted. His timid, nerdy friend was gone, and Frank wasn't certain whether that was such a bad thing or not.

"I wish I could do the same," Frank muttered, staring at the spoon in his hand.

Games were supposed to be an escape from his life. Yet even in AO, Frank was just average. All his affinities were set at exactly 3% each. He had no ability to perform magic, and the mages in Grey Keep had laughed him out of their schools. So Frank had stupidly decided to roll a warrior, thinking he could stand on the frontlines. Yet that had ended in complete and abject failure.

AO wasn't like the other games he had played. He couldn't just auto-attack a target. He had to run and jump and swing. Frank just couldn't do it. He had even gotten the shit kicked out of him by the low-level monsters in the first town. With few options, he had joined groups to level, relying on others to carry him through the fights. He had felt like virtual deadweight.

He had thought joining up with Jason and Riley would be different, but so far he hadn't offered much help to the group. He was merely a distraction. First to allow Jason and Riley to kill the werewolves and then by sacrificing his life to buy the group additional time in their first encounter with the minotaurs.

"Maybe Jerry was right," Frank said aloud. "Maybe I just can't get out of my own damn way."

He knew the enemies in the game weren't real. He knew that running up a mountain had nothing to do with his fitness in the real world. Yet he just couldn't get past this block in his head. Years of living as the fat family-reject and enduring the constant abuse were just too much.

The reporter continued to drone on, the display behind him shifting. Patricia and her daughter appeared briefly on the screen, and a memory flitted through Frank's mind. He remembered what Jason had said to Patricia after he had raised the woman and her daughter.

Jason had spoken with such passion and conviction. "You have been given another chance to remake yourself," he had told Patricia. Frank wished he had the strength to do the same – to be something more than average.

* * *

The group had logged off for the evening shortly after the massacre of the minotaurs. When Jason entered the game the next morning, he immediately began summoning his new minions. Most of the minotaur corpses had been burnt beyond redemption, but that didn't stop Jason from re-summoning the beasts as skeletons. This reduced their level from roughly 140 to 120, but they were still effective in combat.

Unfortunately, he quickly discovered that each of the minotaurs took up two spots in calculating his Control Limit. This meant he could only summon 17 of the creatures. Confused about this quirk, Jason decided to scout the maze a bit before Frank and Riley logged in later that afternoon so that he could inspect a living minotaur.

When he finally found one of the beasts, he noticed a small star next to its name. He deduced that the minotaurs must be some type of "elite" monster, which might explain why summoning the creatures used more of his Control Limit. It was typical for games to stock dungeons with more difficult monsters since the developers assumed that groups would be tackling the creatures together. Jason could only mutter under his breath about game balance.

With a sigh, he returned to the entrance of the maze to wait for Riley and Frank to log back in. While he was waiting, he decided to send a few of the new minotaurs to collect more of the pines that grew along the trail leading into the valley. He intended to equip the beasts with spears since the weapons were more effective in some situations than the two-handed axes the bulls carried by default. He also had his zombies fashion straps with their extra equipment so that the minotaurs could sling their axes to their backs. He still had a veritable mountain of scrap gear leftover in his bags from his fight with Alexion.

Jason then settled in to continue his reading. He was making considerable progress through his book list, devouring many of the dense treatises on military strategy and politics. He hadn't enjoyed the dry material at first, but he now found it intriguing. Humans had been fighting for centuries, both in the field and from their desks, and they had come up with some incredible ways of doing so.

After a few hours, Jason was rewarded with a skill notification:

> **New Skill: Learning**
> Your focus on improving your mental acuity and knowledge have increased the speed with which you learn. You will receive a bonus to skill growth in-game. It is said that those who master this skill can learn new abilities by merely watching others. I

wouldn't count on it in your case.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect 1: You receive 0.10% increased learning speed for skills.

That's not much of a bonus, but I suppose it will add up over time.

His thoughts were interrupted as Riley and Frank both reentered the game, twin flashes of multicolored light appearing near the dungeon entrance. Jason waved at them from where he sat on a boulder in the valley and then hurried over.

"I can't wait for the weekend coming up," Frank said with a sigh. "We lose a lot of time each day attending class."

"A break would be nice," Riley said softly. Jason didn't miss the sad look in her eyes before she glanced away quickly.

"Wish we could go ahead and graduate already. It's not like this last year of high school is going to change much." He turned to Jason. "But I still have no idea how you manage to find the time to handle your classes remotely and still play as much as you do. I practically never see you log off."

Jason shrugged noncommittally, glancing at Alfred beside him. "It's a mystery," Jason replied with a forced chuckle. He knew that the AI was somehow bypassing the mandatory system log off. "You guys ready to get started?"

They both nodded, and the group reentered the dungeon. They made much better time now that Jason led a small army of minotaurs. His new minions didn't fit easily in the narrow hallways, but, when they encountered enemies, the skeletons' bulky forms and their makeshift spears created an effective blockade. Riley and Jason's ranged minions could then whittle down the enemy creatures with little risk. The remaining zombie minotaurs also made it much easier to locate traps and to navigate the maze since they had the layout memorized.

After a few hours, the group had explored most of the maze, revealing a large blank area in the center of the labyrinth that had not yet been mapped. Based on Jason's calculations, the entrance to this undiscovered area was located on the eastern side of the maze. While they headed to the entrance of this new area, Jason took the opportunity to check his notifications.

x5 Level Up!
You have (70) undistributed stat points.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Leadership

Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2
Effect 1: Minions and subjects will receive a 6.5% increased learning speed for skills.
Effect 2: Increased reputation with NPC commanders and leaders.

Wow. Even with my new Learning skill, my level and skill growth have slowed considerably.

Jason missed the days where he could gain twenty levels in one battle. Now that he was at a much higher level and fighting in a group, his progress had slowed considerably. He had also determined that Riley and Frank were receiving a disproportionate amount of the experience. This was probably due to their relatively low levels. Jason suspected this feature was intended to compensate for the level gap.

Frank and Riley must be close to Level 100 by now. It's probably a good thing they're getting most of the experience since we're going to need any edge we can get. The levels of the enemies in this dungeon seem abnormally high. I'm actually a bit nervous to see what's in the final room.

Jason also took the opportunity to check his character status.

Character Status

Name:	
Class:	Lancer
Alignment:	Evil
Fame:	
Health:	
Mana:	
Stamina:	
Strength:	
Dexterity:	
Intelligence:	
Wisdom:	
Endurance:	

Affinities

Light:	
Water:	
Earth:	

He noticed that his dark affinity had increased slightly. He chalked this up to murdering a town full of people and then holding an impromptu barbecue. Jason still hadn't used his free stat points since he wasn't certain what to do with them. Additional health would likely be useful, but he was reluctant to commit the points.

So, as usual, I do nothing. I'm going to have to make up my mind eventually.

The group arrived in front of a broad set of double doors made of stone. The doorway loomed over them, stretching nearly twenty feet into the air. This was the first set of doors they had discovered since entering the maze, and they felt out of place after the endless open hallways. Jason checked his map, confirming that they were standing just east of the blank area in the center of the maze.

"Great," Frank muttered. "These doors don't look ominous at all."

"It doesn't help that we have no idea what's on the other side," Riley added. "Do you think there will be more minotaurs?" Instead of nervousness, Jason detected a faint note of excitement in her voice. A quick glance confirmed that her eyes were filled with her dark mana.

Didn't she used to be reluctant to go into battle?

Jason sighed. "I don't like it any more than you do, Frank. Yet we don't have much choice. We're just going to have to open the door and find out what's inside." He paused for a moment, and then a grin curled his lips. "Besides, worst-case scenario we all die, right?"

Frank glanced away quickly, covering up his anxiety with a snort and some bluster. "Easy for you to say. You haven't tried it."

Jason could feel his heartbeat speed up. He wasn't going to get a chance to plan for whatever they encountered inside this room. That meant he was going to have to wing it and hope for the best. Unfortunately, if they encountered enemies, this was also the best chance they had to win since he still had all his minions. If they lost the battle, Jason might have more information regarding their opponents, but they would be severely weakened by the loss of his minotaurs. There were still corpses remaining in the maze, but likely not enough to hit his Control Limit again. Plus, he might lose his casters and ranged minions. His class sometimes had a few severe drawbacks.

Jason closed his eyes for a moment. He had a lot riding on this dungeon, and they needed to move quickly. He still hadn't told Frank and Riley what he'd done – or what he planned to do. They couldn't afford to lose this fight.

Fuck it. I'm all in. If that's the case, then I may as well give it my all.

Jason opened his eyes. Dark mana cascaded through his body,

turning his eyes a dark obsidian. The cold sensation crept up his spine and swiftly extinguished his fear. There was no room for hesitation. “Let’s do this,” Jason said, his voice ringing with power as his mana pulsed in his veins.

Jason waved at his minotaurs, and they pushed open the door, revealing a large circular room. The chamber was nearly fifty yards long and was ringed with metal grates. Torches along the walls cast long, flickering shadows into the room. Yet the most imposing part of the chamber was the crude stone throne that stood at its center. On the throne sat an enormous minotaur – one far larger than the bulls that the group had fought in the maze. Bones littered the ground around the stone monument, their appearance unnervingly human.

The remains of the missing villagers? Jason wondered.

The group piled into the room and took up a formation in front of the throne. Jason moved the skeletal minotaurs forward and positioned his ranged troops safely behind them. Riley and Frank stood to either side of him.

The beast sitting on the throne raised his head lazily. Unlike his smaller brothers, this creature’s eyes shone with some semblance of intelligence. He watched the group carefully and then rose, the muscles in his arms and legs bulging. As the beast stood, Jason had to crane his neck to look at him. The minotaur towered over them at nearly 15 feet tall. This minotaur’s hair was much finer than the others and it shone in the flickering torchlight. Two magnificent, spiraling horns jutted from the beast’s skull, with smaller horns framing the top of his head like a crown.

A quick inspection showed that the beast was level 166 and was named “The Minotaur King.” Jason noticed two small stars next to his name, likely indicating that this was a boss creature – as though that wasn’t obvious.

“Who are you?” the Minotaur King asked in a booming voice, his tone carrying a note of deadly intent as his glowing red eyes surveyed the group. His jaw formed the words awkwardly, as though he was unaccustomed to speaking.

Jason stared at the beast for a moment in shock, not expecting to converse with a dungeon boss. “My name is Jason, and we’re here to claim this dungeon,” Jason finally said.

The beast snorted and shook his head. “You vermin think you can defeat the herd? Or perhaps you think that we’re all that lies within these ruins.” The bull’s lips lifted slowly, revealing pink gums and massive tusks as he grinned grotesquely.

He motioned to the skeletal minotaurs that stood in front of the group. “You have claimed my brothers under your spell, but this won’t help you. There are greater dangers in these halls than this small

portion of the herd. You have yet to meet our masters."

"Who are your masters?" Jason asked in confusion. He had been assuming that this was the end of the dungeon. Riley and Frank both looked at him in surprise but kept their weapons ready.

His question was met with another disconcerting smile. "It doesn't matter. You will not survive to meet them. You haven't seen the true might of my brothers and sisters…" The Minotaur King trailed off, reaching for the throne. This was the first time Jason had noticed the rods jutting from the floor next to the crude stone chair. They looked a lot like levers.

Jason's eyes darted to the numerous iron grates that ringed the room. "Oh shit," he muttered.

Then the minotaur's hand swept across the row of levers.

The door to the room banged shut with an ominous thud and Jason could hear large bolts sliding into place. Then the spine-tingling screech of metal filled the air as the grates slowly began to rise. Anticipating what was coming, Jason desperately reconfigured their formation to create a semi-circle with his melee troops.

Stupid! Why did I move us into the middle of the room?

"Ambush," Jason called out. "They'll come from all sides! Pull back! Put the door behind us!"

Riley and Frank were already moving as the group retreated to put the door at their backs. It took a monumental amount of concentration for Jason to move the formation of zombies in unison. He could barely focus on walking. Frank roughly pushed him forward, keeping his shield up. He had clearly appointed himself as Jason's bodyguard.

Roars filled the air as dozens of minotaurs rushed from the cages. These weren't simply the large bulls they had seen in the hallways. This group was comprised primarily of smaller beasts with blunted horns and what could only have been the herd's calves. As the horde approached, Jason eyed the new batch of enemies with mixed feelings as he struggled to control the zombies.

"These are the women and children…" Riley said, her voice obscured by the furious roars of the beasts.

Jason shared her reservations, but they didn't have the luxury of hesitating. Each of the beasts held large axes and looked at the group with murder in their eyes. Once their formation reached the door, Jason ordered the archers and mages to attack. Patches of ice appeared in front of the group, and dark curses flew through the air.

As his casters blunted the enemy's charge, Jason ordered his remaining zombie minotaurs forward, his hands moving through the familiar rhythm of his *Corpse Explosion* spell. The sacrificial zombies used their momentum to burrow deep into the enemy lines before the

dark shadows reached them.

The explosions rocked the room, disintegrating the stone floor and throwing up clouds of dust. The sound of the blasts was amplified by the stone walls and floor, creating a painful shockwave that rebounded around the room. Amidst the chaos, dark tendrils of energy lanced at the air as the beasts screamed in agony. A bloody mist crept through the room, casting the battle in a red haze that partially obscured the group's view of the onrushing creatures.

The noise shocked Riley out of her stupor. She shook herself and firmed her grip on her bow, repeatedly firing at the minotaurs that had managed to recover from the explosions. Meanwhile, Frank maintained his position beside Jason, his hands trembling slightly with a mixture of fear and adrenaline.

A booming voice filled the air. "Kill the intruders! For the herd!" At the sound of the Minotaur King's voice, a glowing red aura enveloped the minotaurs, and their muscles bulged and rippled. The thick veins under their skin began to glow a dark red.

Some kind of enrage effect? Jason thought desperately. *There are still so many!*

He gave orders to his skeletons. With a series of thuds, their makeshift wooden spears struck the stone ground as a line of spear points were leveled at the charging bulls. A second line of skeletons stood behind the spearmen, wielding heavy bladed axes. Thankfully, Jason had the foresight to arm his minotaurs with spears, which were much more effective in preparing a defensive formation.

The front line of the enemy hit Jason's zombies with a sickening crunch. Minotaurs impaled themselves along the wooden shafts, showering the ground in thick red blood. The beasts that made it past the initial line of spears were met by the axes of Jason's second line of skeletal minotaurs. Their blades sliced into the flesh of the enemy creatures.

Jason watched in shock as beasts that had suffered grievous injuries or lost limbs continued fighting with a disconcerting rage. Their axes met the bones of Jason's skeletons with a hollow crunching sound, shattering limbs. It seemed impossible that the creatures could still be moving. Jason glanced at the Minotaur King who still stood at the center of the room. His body glowed a brilliant red, and he held a wickedly curved battle axe in each hand. His arms were raised in the air as he roared in rage.

"We need to distract the King!" Jason shouted above the chaos of the battle. He didn't have a way to make it through the enemy line, not that he could afford to move as he frantically summoned new zombies using the fresh minotaur corpses. Riley was similarly occupied, firing arrow after arrow into the line of charging beasts, her

shafts striking eyes and weak points with uncanny accuracy.

Jason's thoughts were interrupted by a scream from beside him. He turned to see Frank hurtling toward the defensive line of skeletons. He could see that his friend had removed his armor and held his two-handed sword aloft. The loss of his equipment allowed him to move much faster. He barreled past Jason's minions, his large body unnaturally nimble. Using his mass and momentum, he then shouldered through the enemy line, taking advantage of his enemies' surprise to dodge their feeble blows.

What the hell is he doing?

Jason frantically ordered his dark mages into motion, malignant curses racing toward the Minotaur King. Maybe he could slow the beast just enough to give Frank a fighting chance.

Then Frank slammed into the beast. He attacked savagely, swinging his sword in ferocious, heavy strikes. The Minotaur King stumbled back at the force of Frank's blows, parrying his sword with his axes. The sound of clashing metal filled the air and mixed with Frank's screams as he attacked relentlessly. Frank maintained *Sprint* constantly, dancing around the minotaur in a series of rapid steps as he rained blow after blow upon the enormous beast.

Frank's assault had an immediate effect; the red aura began to dissipate as the Minotaur King's attention was diverted. Riley took advantage of this opportunity, her arrows picking off the severely injured beasts in a systematic fashion. Jason began to summon more zombies as quickly as he could, replacing the minions that he had lost. He could see that the tide of battle was beginning to turn in the group's favor.

As he continued to cast, Jason glanced at Frank. His friend had apparently lost it. He attacked without any regard for his own safety or health. His unarmored body was riddled with wounds and blood drenched his shirt and pants where the Minotaur King's axes had torn his skin. Yet the bull creature was largely unharmed, his form towering over Frank menacingly. A glance at the group menu showed that Frank's health was beginning to redline. Jason's lone light mage was frantically casting heals on Frank, but it wasn't enough to compensate for the damage he was taking.

With nothing else he could do, Jason screamed at Riley, "Help Frank! He's going to die!"

Riley glanced at Jason, her brow furrowed in confusion. Then her gaze turned to Frank, and her dark eyes widened slightly. She hesitated for a second before pulling an arrow from her quiver. She sighted along the length of the shaft as she took aim at the Minotaur King and Frank where they twirled in a deadly dance of steel. The shot was almost impossible, and Jason couldn't understand what she

was thinking.

Then she released.

The arrow raced through the air, darting through a narrow hole in the mass of flailing weapons and bodies. Then it broke through the line of creatures. As it approached the Minotaur King, the arrowhead began to glow a dark red and streamers of black energy curled around the wooden shaft. The bolt slammed into the Minotaur King's side. The beast let out a howl of pain, but he couldn't afford to turn to remove the shaft as he continued to parry Frank's relentless blows.

Blood poured from the wound in the king's side. Yet instead of running down his body in rivulets, the droplets of blood detached from the minotaur's body, first in a small stream and then in a torrent. A bloody mist quickly filled the area, pulsing and throbbing like a living thing as it drained the creature. The Minotaur King howled in pain, as he tried to reach behind him to grab the arrow. However, Frank used the distraction to rush forward, swinging his sword recklessly and forcing the beast to hastily parry his attack with both his axes.

Jason's eyes darted to Frank and then widened in shock. Where the blood mist touched Frank's wounds, the droplets collected into a ball of blood and the flesh began to mend slowly. Glancing at Frank's health bar, Jason saw that he was being healed slowly.

"What the hell was that?" Jason yelled at Riley.

She only grinned and continued shooting at the remaining minotaurs attacking their defensive line. Her arrows punctured eyes and throats as the battle raged around them. Bolts of ice and flame flew over the heads of Jason's remaining minions. Between the enemies' losses and the reinforcements Jason had summoned, they were slowly whittling down the horde.

One advantage of being a Necromancer: the longer the battle rages, the stronger I get, Jason thought, his mouth set in a grim line.

He paused for a moment to chug a potion, desperately trying to refill his depleted mana pool. Then Jason glanced back at the fight between Frank and the Minotaur King. Despite the rage behind his blows, Frank was landing few hits against the beast.

I can fix that.

Jason motioned to three recently summoned minotaurs. The beasts hurtled toward the King and Frank. Jason directed one of the beasts to shoulder Frank out of the way, sending his body flying across the room. Then the three decaying bulls exploded in a shower of dark magic and viscera. The series of explosions rocked the Minotaur King. His skin began to melt from his body in patches, and he dropped to one knee gasping for breath. The explosions weren't enough to kill the beast, but that wasn't Jason's goal.

Frank pulled himself from the ground, his clothing shredded and bloody. He looked back at the weakened beast with rage in his eyes. He charged forward at a sprint, a hoarse roar escaping his lips. As he neared the boss creature, Frank leaped into the air, his two-handed sword held high. The beast tried to raise his axes, but moved too slowly. Frank's blade struck the minotaur's neck with a sickening thud. The blade lodged in the King's throat, stuck halfway through his thick flesh. The Minotaur King stared at Frank with shocked eyes, gasping vainly for air as blood bubbled at the corner of his mouth and rocketed from the wound in his neck. Then the creature's body crumpled to the ground.

Frank didn't stop. He wrenched his blade free with a gruesome sucking sound and chopped down again and again, blood spraying his chest and legs and pooling on the floor. Only when the beast's head parted from his body did Frank finally stop. His chest heaved, and his eyes were wild. His clothing was in tatters, revealing his blood-covered skin. Frank grabbed the head, raising it into the air and screaming in triumph. His roar was echoed by Jason's minions.

I'm definitely a bad influence, Jason thought as he gazed at his friend's blood-drenched body and the manic gleam in his eyes.

Chapter 16 - Fruitful

Frank stood amidst a chaotic sea of noise and action. He glanced to his side, where Jason's imposing figure stood in the middle of the pocket formed by the defensive line of skeletons. As Frank watched, Jason's hands raced through an intricate series of gestures. Dark shadows arced from his body, striking enemies and raising the dead minotaurs that had fallen in battle. To Frank's right, he could see Riley, her bow humming a melody of death as the dark shafts of her arrows disappeared into the waves of beasts that broke against the hulking skeletons standing before them.

Yet with all the action taking place around him, Frank stood still. His shield was raised and his sword ready, but he did nothing. His hands trembled as he looked at the enormous beasts in front of him. They towered over him, their eyes filled with rage.

"We need to distract the King!" Jason shouted over the roar of the battle, pointing to the enormous bull that still stood in the center of the room. His axes were raised in the air, and a pulsing red aura emanated from his body.

Frank could see the effects of the spell as it enveloped the herd attacking them. Their eyes glowed an angry red, and they shrugged off mortal wounds. A calf's arm was severed by the bladed axe of one of Jason's minions. Yet the creature barely noticed the loss, swinging the axe in its free hand with wild abandon.

As Frank watched the battle, he realized Jason and Riley couldn't leave the safety of the defensive line. They were barely holding back the enemy as it was. The only person that wasn't helping was Frank. Yet as his eyes lit on the King, he could feel his fear escalate. How the hell could he fight that?

He turned away and then stopped himself. This was what he always did, wasn't it? Talked himself out of action, resigned himself to being second-rate. He could feel familiar anger and shame well up inside him. Except this time, the target was himself. Why was he content to settle for the participation trophy? Why couldn't he be the hero?

As his anger increased, his fear faded. Instead of trying to tamp down on his anger, Frank fed it. He was a useless, fat slob. He deserved to fail. He hurled at himself all the insults, the condescension, and the shame he had suffered over the years. He looked at the Minotaur King with rage-filled eyes, clinging to that anger as it burned away his fear and reservation. This was just one more taunt, one more piece of evidence that he wouldn't be anything more than average.

He wouldn't take it anymore. He couldn't take it anymore.

With a hasty gesture, he pulled up his character menu. In a flash of movement, he assigned all the points he had been secretly hoarding for his future class change. Then he pulled up his equipment menu and unequipped everything except for his two-handed sword. With an angry wave of his hand, he swiped away the screens that impaired his vision.

Only the Minotaur King remained, and fury bubbled and frothed in his mind. He couldn't focus on anything else. This was his moment. His chance to become something more. Frank rushed headlong into the maelstrom of combat while activating Sprint*, his sword held tightly in his hands. He darted around the enemies in front of him, using his bulk to shove aside anything that got in his way. As he charged forward, Frank howled. He poured every ounce of his anger, his frustration, and his pain into a single continuous roar.*

Then his blade slammed into the Minotaur King's axes. He pounded the beast repeatedly, forgoing any combat form or tactics in favor of a chaotic frenzy of movement. The clash of steel rang out as the king parried his blows, yet Frank didn't give him time to go on the offensive. He darted around the hulking creature, his blade whirling and dancing through the air. And through it all, Frank screamed.

Out of nowhere, he was struck in the side. Frank was sent hurtling through the air, landing on the stone floor with a heavy thud as explosions sounded like cannon fire behind him. This just served to escalate his anger further. He raised his eyes and saw the Minotaur King kneeling a dozen yards away, trying vainly to regain his footing. Frank pushed himself upright, his muscles screaming in protest. He charged, pumping his legs hard, as he raised his blade over his head.

Then he leaped.

His sword struck the Minotaur King's neck with a sickening crunch. Blood gushed from the wound, splattering Frank's face and clothes. It wasn't enough. The creature deserved worse. They all deserved worse. For the hurtful words they'd spouted. For the terrible things they'd done. For the way he'd allowed them to make him hate himself.

He hacked at the beast, again and again, feeling the vibrations ripple up his arms as he cleaved into the minotaur's flesh. Blood gushed through the air, obscuring his vision and painting the world in red. A final blow severed the creature's head, and Frank stumbled forward. He looked down at the head in puzzlement, not quite understanding what he was seeing. Then he reached out and grabbed a spiraling horn.

Frank raised the Minotaur King's head into the air and shouted his victory. "I am not average," he roared. "I will never be average again!"

* * *

After the death of the Minotaur King, the battle quickly wound to a close. With the death of their leader, the effect of the malevolent aura faded and Jason's newly summoned zombies soon overwhelmed them. As the final minotaur drew his last breath, Jason was greeted with a prompt:

System Message

Congratulations, you have cleared the first level of the dungeon!

Your respawn point has been updated.

Hmm, does that mean we'll respawn in this room now?

Jason's eyes darted from the prompt to Frank. His friend was still standing over the Minotaur King and staring at his corpse. He was drenched in blood, and his clothing was in tatters. Jason's brow furrowed as he inspected Frank. It was hard to tell with the blood, but he could have sworn that there was much more muscle definition in Frank's arms and chest than he remembered.

Jason approached slowly, not certain how stable his friend was. Watching from a safe distance, Riley was ready to intervene if Frank went crazy again. "Hey, man. You okay?" Jason asked tentatively.

Frank didn't respond immediately. Then he looked up with an excited grin on his face. Blood covered the left side of his face, giving his smile a sinister cast. "I finally found some real loot! Look at these things!" Frank lifted the Minotaur King's axes, handing one to Jason.

Jason heaved a mental sigh of relief. His friend had reverted to his normal self. A bloody version of himself with a slightly manic gleam in his eyes, but normalish.

"What's this?" Jason asked, accepting the axe from Frank. His hand dipped precariously under the weight of the weapon. He could feel the muscles in his arm straining to hold the object upright. Jason glanced up to see Frank making a few experimental swings with the other axe and wondered how his friend managed to carry the weapon, let alone swing it.

Looking down at the axe in his hands, Jason noticed that it was exquisitely crafted. It was nearly three feet long and double bladed, the steel curving to wicked points. The hilt and blade were inscribed with detailed scrollwork and runes that glowed a faint red. Jason thought the word "inspect," and the resulting information made his jaw drop.

Rage of the Taurus (Set Item - Two Pieces)
This weapon was crafted by a master blacksmith. The runes along the hilt are written in Veridian and refer to the bull-god Kathos. When used in a set, these two axes amplify the user's power, allowing him to call on the might of the herd.
Quality: B
Damage: 60-120 (Slash)
Durability: 96/100
+20 Strength (Set Increase)
+10 Vitality (Set Increase)
+10 Endurance (Set Increase)
(Soulbound)

Set Bonus (1/2)
Unlocks the skill, *Rage of the Herd*, which increases the damage of teammates within range by 10%. Teammates will also fight past the point of death, allowing them to sustain up to -200 health before they die. If this effect ends while a teammate is below zero health, they will die instantly. This buff can only be cast while standing still and is channeled.
Cost: 100 Stamina/Sec
Cooldown: 15 minutes

"Damn," Jason murmured. He glanced up at Frank, who was still grinning excitedly. Jason didn't blame him. The axes were ridiculous. He was already considering how useful the buff could be. They would have to experiment to determine the range. Judging from that last battle, it was at least a couple dozen yards.

"So we never decided how we were going to divide the loot," Frank said with a sly smile. "I'd like to propose we hand over the gear to whoever can best use it."

Riley walked up to the pair, peering over Jason's shoulder at the axe in his hands. "Ooooh, that's pretty," she said. "I second Frank's motion! Since I'm the only one who's dual wielding and I've seen the most melee combat lately, I guess I get the axes!"

Jason coughed to cover his laugh and assumed a serious expression. "That does make sense…." he began.

Frank stared at them with a deadpan expression for a few long moments before bursting out, "Are you kidding me? You couldn't even lift these things!" He looked like he was about to have a heart attack and was already looking mournfully at the other axe in his hand.

Riley laughed, having succeeded in getting a rise out of Frank. She raised her hands defensively. “I’m just kidding. Take them. You sure earned them, killer.”

“I agree,” Jason added, handing the axe back to Frank. “Take them, man. You will definitely be getting the most use out of them.”

Frank just glanced between the pair, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. His shoulders finally slumped, and he muttered, “You guys suck.” Then he shook himself, straightening his back and looking Jason and Riley in the eye. “Thank you.”

While their burly friend was occupied with petting his shiny new loot, Jason turned to Riley. “So you have some explaining to do. What was with that arrow and the blood? It would have been helpful to know you had that skill before this fight,” he added, a note of irritation in his voice.

Riley grimaced and looked everywhere but at Jason. “Well, Jerry showed me the skill. It’s called *Blood Mist*. It applies a damage-over-time effect on the target and a healing-over-time effect on nearby teammates if the weapon remains in the target.”

Jason glared at her. “Are you kidding me? You’ve had a healing ability this whole time?”

“Hey, don’t get mad at me! I thought it was useless. Jerry only showed me how to activate the skill while I was using my daggers. I never thought I could use it with my bow. I just gambled to save Frank.” She motioned to their large friend who was still crooning over his axes, oblivious to their conversation.

“You still could have told me you had the skill,” Jason replied. The argument felt hollow even as he said it. Even if he had known about the skill, could he have come up with this unique use on his own?

Riley frowned. “Maybe I should have, but how was I supposed to know it was important? At least it worked out.”

Jason nodded grudgingly. The skill would have limited usefulness if she could only use it in melee. However, this also demonstrated how versatile the skills in AO were. The developers apparently wanted the players to get creative. His eyes darted to Alfred who sat nearby, having found one of the few spaces on the floor that wasn’t covered in blood or body parts.

Or perhaps Alfred is responsible for this level of complexity. This seems beyond the abilities of even a talented game developer.

Jason gave a mental shrug. It didn’t matter. The key takeaway was that he needed to understand exactly what skills his teammates had. There might be many more tactical options available to the group if he could utilize their skills creatively.

A part of him felt guilty as he considered this. He needed to ask

Frank and Riley about their classes and skills, yet he didn't plan to disclose his own. At least, he didn't plan to tell them about a few of the skills he hadn't used in front of them. They had yet to see him use *Custom Skeleton*, for example. He just couldn't afford to reveal information about his class.

Which is just another way of saying you don't trust either of them yet. If I turn that around, why should they trust me? We've only been traveling together for a few days.

Jason turned back to Riley. "Sorry I snapped at you. That was quick thinking with the arrows, and your gamble definitely paid off."

"Better be careful, or I'll put you out of a job," Riley replied, her eyes dancing with laughter. "I could end up being our strategic mastermind."

Jason snorted, placing a hand on his chest. "I'll have you know that it takes skill to do what I do. You have to have a knack for finding hiding spots…" This earned him another laugh from Riley.

Their conversation was interrupted by a ringing sound. Jason's UI flashed, and an envelope appeared in the bottom right-hand side of his vision. He reached out and tapped the icon, and a message appeared in the air before him. Claire had sent him an email asking if he could visit the Cerillion Entertainment office that afternoon. She and Robert needed to meet with him in person to discuss the gameplay footage he had sent in regarding the events in Peccavi.

Ugh, this can't be good. The way Claire worded this message makes it sound like I've messed up somehow. They probably want to find out whether they hired a real-life psychopath. I guess I need to take care of this. They're the ones paying my bills after all.

Jason looked at Frank and Riley who were both inspecting their level-up notifications. Then his gaze moved to the bodies that still littered the ground. He just needed to raise the corpses and pile the extra bodies against one wall. Then he could set up a defensive perimeter around the room before he logged off.

While he summoned his new minions, Jason checked his in-game clock. It was roughly mid-afternoon in the real world, and he assumed that he'd use up the rest of the day traveling to Cerillion Entertainment headquarters and then back home. That meant that they had spent nearly two real-world days conquering the first floor and they only had about two and a half days remaining before the dungeon reset. At least there was a weekend coming up. That should give them a ton of time in-game since Riley and Frank wouldn't have class.

Then his thoughts turned to the message he had sent before entering the dungeon. He might have a few days before the reset timer ran out, but he needed to conquer the dungeon well before then.

I'm cutting this close. We better hurry.

"Hey, guys," Jason said, trying to catch Frank's and Riley's attention. "I need to go take care of an errand in the real world. It's probably going to take me the rest of the day. You guys want to start again tomorrow?"

Frank nodded. "Sure thing, man. Tomorrow's Friday so we can keep going as long as we need to."

"My evening is free tomorrow too," Riley added. "Besides, I'm curious what that minotaur meant when he mentioned the Masters."

"You and me both," Jason murmured. He suspected there was a lot more left to this dungeon and he was already anxious about whether they would be able to complete it in time. Putting aside his worry for the moment, Jason bid his friends goodbye and logged off.

Chapter 17 - Flat-Footed

Alexion walked down the street toward the temple of the Lady of Light. It was nighttime, and the occasional lantern along the street emitted a weak light, partially illuminating the packed dirt and cobblestones of the road.

As he approached the temple, a black cat passed in front of him. It stopped and stared at him for a moment before continuing on its way down the street, melting quickly into the shadows. The image of the black cat Alexion had seen in the marketplace flashed through his mind, but he pushed the memory aside. It was just a coincidence. He couldn't afford to be distracted this evening.

As Alexion reached the temple, he stepped quietly through the entrance. The priests had long since retired for the evening, and the central hall was shrouded in darkness. Only the faint light from the lanterns outside filtered into the temple. Alexion murmured softly, and a golden globe encased his hand, the light pushing back at the thick shadows that filled the room.

He made his way toward the door behind the altar. He needed to move swiftly. Once he had scouted the crypts, he could send a message to the other players he had "persuaded" to assist him. They were a reliable lot – made that way by the blackmail material that Alex had collected on each of them. They wouldn't dare cross him.

Alexion gently pulled open the door to the crypts, revealing a narrow staircase. He slipped through the doorway and closed the door firmly behind him. At the bottom of the stairs, Alexion hesitated and glanced around the room. A large rectangular chamber sat directly beneath the main hall above. The ceiling of the room was built of smoothly curving stone arches, and columns stood in neat rows at regular intervals. The chamber was filled with shelves, and the walls were lined with crevices, each containing skeletal remains and urns.

His mission was simple. He was going to defile the crypt and remove the remains. The desecration and a short message painted in blood should make it clear who had despoiled the tomb. He was still trying to decide between "Beware the Twilight Throne" or something more direct. Perhaps "Death to the living."

Still pondering this choice, Alexion approached a sarcophagus that lay at the back of the crypt. The stone vessel was decorated with intricate carvings depicting the Lady guiding a man to the afterlife. She cradled the man's body as onlookers knelt nearby in worship.

Without thinking, Alexion pushed at the lid of the tomb. With his

increased strength, the stone slab slid back with little resistance. Within the stone box, he saw a skeleton lying prone, its hands crossed over its chest. A gold ring still sat around the man's finger, and an expensive necklace hung loosely across the bones of his chest.

As Alexion gazed down at the remains, a strange feeling suddenly overcame him and his vision blurred. The stone sarcophagus disappeared. He now stood in front of a mahogany coffin, his head barely cresting the lip of the vessel. The wood had been polished to the point that Alex could see his reflection on the surface. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his nose was running.

However, what captured his attention was the woman that lay inside the box. His mother looked serene, her eyes were closed, and her face was relaxed. She barely resembled the sick and angry person that Alex remembered.

Tears streamed down his face as Alex looked at his mother. She was simply asleep. She would wake up soon, and they would go home. Things would go back to normal, like before she became ill.

His small hands clutched at the edge of the coffin. "Wake up, Mama!" Wake up!" he yelled, his tiny knuckles white as he shook the wooden box.

"George!" a voice called. Alex glanced up and saw a man dressed in a black robe standing on the other side of the casket. The man was frantically calling for his father. "George, come take care of your son!"

"What are you doing, Alex?" an angry voice demanded from behind him. Alex's head whipped around as he heard his father. George frowned, raising a hand to the stately man beside him, indicating that he needed a moment. He then weaved through the crowd toward the coffin.

Alex didn't have much time left if he was going to convince his mother to give up her game. He shook the coffin more violently. "Please wake up! You're just faking! Lanes don't die!" he cried desperately.

A hand grasped his shoulder, pulling him roughly away from the casket. "What are you doing, Alex?" his father repeated. George's eyes hovered in his vision, filled with anger. He glanced at the crowd around them, frowning at the attention they were drawing.

"You're making a spectacle," his father hissed under his breath. His hand on Alex's arm clenched tighter, causing pain to radiate down from his bicep to his fingers. "Is this what your mother would have wanted? Would she have wanted you to show such weakness in public?"

Alex's mind scrambled to process what his father was saying. Was he being weak? His mother had hated weakness. Yet the despair and sadness he felt were overwhelming. His mind scrambled to find some relief from the sensation. Then a strange, hollow feeling overcame him, washing away his pain and his anxiety. He let the feeling settle over his mind like a warm blanket, reveling in the relief from the pain.

The image faded, and Alexion leaned heavily on the stone sarcophagus in front of him as his breath came in heaving gasps. That familiar hollowness had abandoned him again, leaving a soul-crushing despair in its absence. His mind recoiled at the sensation, and his heart raced.

"Mother…" he gasped with a broken sound.

A cough sounded from behind him. "What are you doing?" a voice asked in irritation. It was one of the men who had come to help him clean out the tomb. "Are you ready to get started or what? We need to move quickly; I have homework to do... Not that you care."

Alexion quickly wiped away the tears that streamed down his cheeks, stifled a sob, and forced himself to take a breath. He had work to do. He needed to focus. A Lane didn't show weakness in front of anyone. Yet the despair still radiated through his mind – unfortunately, the hollowness didn't answer his call this time.

* * *

An hour later, Jason walked into the lobby at Cerillion Entertainment headquarters. The grand ceiling towered over him, and his shoes whispered softly against the marble tiles. He had plenty of time to replay the fight with the Minotaur King in his head on the way to meet Robert and Claire. They had been lucky. The King's aura had prevented Jason from summoning new minions quickly, and they had been outnumbered. If Frank hadn't acted when he did, he was pretty sure they'd be replaying that battle again but with fewer minions.

I wonder if the horde would have respawned if we had failed. I'm glad we don't have to find out.

As Jason surveyed the lobby, he caught sight of Robert leaning against one of the ornate stone columns near the entrance. He was dressed in his typical t-shirt and chucks, which caused him to stick out amid the world of suits and ties that surrounded them. As Jason approached, Robert watched him with a conflicted expression.

"Hi, Jason," he said in a subdued tone.

"Hey, Robert," Jason replied, uncertainty in his voice.

Why is he acting strangely? He was practically gushing with energy the last time we met.

"Is something wrong?" Jason asked.

Robert stared at him with a confused expression. "Are you joking? You might have just started some sort of rebellion, and you're asking me if something is wrong?"

Jason's eyes widened in shock as his mind scrambled to process

what Robert was saying. “What are you talking about? I’ve been in a dungeon pretty much all day,” Jason responded, his brow furrowed in worry.

Robert’s mouth drew into a pinched line. “Then how do you explain this?” he replied shortly. He grabbed Jason’s arm and pulled him to the security terminal in the center of the lobby. Robert motioned to the guard to vacate his seat. The man complied with an irritated scowl. However, a quick glance at Robert’s security badge was enough to keep his mouth shut.

After manipulating the keyboard for a few moments, Robert pulled up the internal network for Cerillion Entertainment. Jason then watched as Robert logged into the console for the company’s new streaming channel, Vermillion Live. A video soon appeared on the screen, showing two reporters.

“Big news from Grey Keep today,” a male reporter announced in a serious voice. “The temple of the Lady of Light has been ransacked. It appears that all of the bodies in the crypt under the temple were stolen.”

“That’s not all,” the woman beside him added. She glanced anxiously at her hands for a moment and then back at the camera. “The intruder killed everyone in the temple, including all of the lower priests. He also left a message…”

The screen behind the pair shifted and showed the image of a poorly illuminated crypt. The camera panned slowly to the right, revealing the lone body of a priest. Blood pooled on the floor and ran down the grout between the stone tiles. Above the corpse was a message written on the wall in drying red blood. In a blunt challenge to the people of Grey Keep, the message stated, “Welcome to the darkness, mortals.”

“This is clearly the work of the Twilight Throne,” the man continued. “I sense Jason’s psychological warfare at work here. Just as worrisome, the people of Grey Keep are now calling for war, and the leadership in the neighboring kingdoms are in an uproar.”

The woman shook her head slowly. “Reports from a few players indicate that Regent Strouse is urging his people to stay calm. He’s indicated that Grey Keep isn’t in a position to launch another full-scale attack after the last confrontation with the Twilight Throne.”

She hesitated before continuing, holding a hand to her ear as she listened to some tidbit of new information being relayed by her producer. “Our sources have indicated that the NPCs in Grey Keep aren’t satisfied with this response. Some players are predicting a full-fledged rebellion.”

“What’s even more concerning is the response by the other players,” the male reporter continued. “The bounty on Jason’s head

has increased again, and many players are discussing banding together to launch another attack on the Twilight Throne with or without the aid of Strouse."

"This wasn't me," Jason muttered, his eyes riveted on the screen.

Robert tapped the console, pausing the video. "If it wasn't you, then someone just made a big goddamn mess and stuck your name on it."

Jason's hands clenched. His good mood at having cleared the first floor of the dungeon had vanished instantly. He didn't need a problem like this right now. Not when he was already racing against the clock to complete the dungeon and was days away from the city. Not only that, but he had just ordered three divisions to reinforce Peccavi. Who could have done this? And better yet, what was their objective?

He gritted his teeth and took a deep breath.

There's nothing I can do about this right now. I need to have my conversation with Robert and Claire and then get back into the game. The only thing I can do at this point is pray that we can complete the dungeon quickly.

Jason sighed and turned to Robert. "I suppose this is the price of fame… or infamy." He forced a grin at this last part. "We may as well get on with our meeting. I need to get back into the game."

Robert looked at him evenly, an unreadable expression on his face. He didn't seem entirely convinced by Jason's nonchalance. "Sure thing," he replied quietly. "Let's go up to the control room, and we can meet with Claire."

They walked over to the bank of elevators. As they approached the metallic doors, they slid open with a faint pneumatic hiss, and a young blond man stepped out. Jason stopped short, his eyes widening in surprise.

Damn it. This day just keeps getting better.

Jason was standing face to face with Alex Lane. "Hello, Alex," Jason greeted, taking the initiative. Gone were the days where he was going to shrink away from his former tormenter. If Alex put together Jason being here with his in-game character, then there was nothing he could do about it at this point.

A brief look of shock registered on Alex's face, turning swiftly to confusion as he tried to determine why Jason was at Cerillion Entertainment headquarters. Then Alex's eyes darted to Robert, and his frown deepened.

After a long pause, Alex responded, "Hi, Jason." He then turned to Robert. "It's also nice to see you again, Robert." Alex didn't even manage a polite smile at this greeting, his mouth twisted into a pained

grimace.

"The pleasure is all mine," Robert replied dryly. "I take it that the two of you know each other?"

Jason nodded, watching Alex carefully. "You could say that. We used to go to school together," he said in a sardonic tone.

Alex eyed Jason curiously, surprised at his cavalier attitude. "We did indeed. Jason here left the school a few weeks ago. In quite a hurry I might add. Something about a girl. It was rather dramatic," he said with a suggestive expression.

Refusing to be baited, Jason simply smiled – the image of Riley blowing Alex's head off dancing in his mind's eye. "Well, the girl turned out to be a bit of a firecracker. She just has an explosive effect on people. You know what I mean, don't you, Alex?" Jason received a stunned look from Alex.

"It's been a pleasure to run into you again," Jason continued. "However, we have some work to do."

A tremor of confusion flashed in Alex's eyes, but he held his tongue. This was the most tongue-tied and off-guard that Jason had ever seen his nemesis. "It was good to see you too, Jason," Alex finally managed to reply as he stared at him coldly. "Take care." With that, Alex walked swiftly toward the entrance to the building.

"I don't know what the hell that was about, but I really don't like that kid," Robert muttered. "If he wasn't George's brat…" He trailed off, shaking his head. He turned to Jason, eyeing him seriously. "By the way, you didn't hear me say that. They like me around here, but you still don't cross the boss' kid."

"Of course," Jason replied with a good-natured shrug as they entered the elevator.

Although he was trying to stay calm, Jason's mind was in turmoil. This was the worst thing that could have happened to him today. Especially since it was coming on the heels of someone pinning the desecration of a temple on him. Alex would inevitably connect the "real-world Jason" with the "in-game Jason." His dad was also on the board of directors, and he had more money than he knew what to do with. If he decided to make Jason's life a living hell, he could certainly do it. Hell, he was probably the one that had put out the real-money bounty on his head.

Jason struggled to calm himself.

This is just one more thing I can't control. Focus!

As they were riding up the elevator, Robert interrupted Jason's jumbled, frantic thoughts, "What about the events in Grey Keep? What are you going to do if everyone is gunning for you?" he asked.

Jason hesitated for a long moment before responding. He couldn't change the mountain of bad news that he had been

confronted with today. However, he wasn't going to lie down and let anyone take what he had created.

"I'll make them regret it," Jason vowed in a cold voice, as his eyes drilled holes into the door of the elevator.

This drew a surprised look from Robert, who observed the skinny teenager from a fresh perspective. He might look like a kid who had just started growing some hair on his chest, but sometimes Jason acted in a way that made it clear that Robert was speaking with the leader of a dark city.

When they arrived at the control room, Robert ushered them into the small conference room to the side of the lab. Techs watched Jason closely as he walked past, and he could make out whispering between the terminals.

They're just a bunch of gossips here, huh?

Jason and Robert took a seat at the conference table, and Claire entered a moment later. She set a pedestal down on the conference table and then turned to Jason, her lips curling in a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Hello, Jason," she greeted him in her usual, efficient manner as she offered her hand.

Jason shook Claire's hand gently and saw her flinch slightly as she touched him. That was a bit odd. He wasn't exactly a lady-killer, but women didn't usually edge away from him when he shook their hand. She also hadn't acted this way when they last met. What had changed? Pushing the thought aside, Jason got down to business.

"So why am I here?" Jason asked bluntly. In light of recent events, he was no longer in a mood to play games or step gingerly around the elephant in the room.

Claire took her seat and fiddled with the pedestal distractedly, not meeting Jason's gaze. "Well, we originally called you in to ask you to do an interview related to what happened in Peccavi. However, with what has now occurred in Grey Keep…"

"Our producer wants you to do an interview regarding the desecration," Robert interjected with a frown. "I just don't know how you're going to do that if you didn't defile the temple."

Claire looked at Robert in shock. "Wait, what? He didn't do it?"

Robert frowned at Claire and responded in a dry tone, "No, he didn't. I haven't checked the system logs to see where his character was at the time the event occurred, but I doubt Jason is lying to me."

"Well, then he can't give the interview! No one is going to believe him if he gets in front of a camera and claims he didn't do it. He would just look stupid," Claire said in an anxious voice. She was clearly already considering how she was going to explain this development to the producer, who must still be rubbing his hands together in glee in a back room somewhere.

Jason sat in silence. He hadn't committed the crime, but it didn't matter. Claire was right. He would be blamed for it anyway. Most of the players and the NPCs of Grey Keep already had a reason to hate him, and they would jump at any additional ammunition.

As he considered his next steps, Jason's thoughts turned to his reading list. He had finished Machiavelli's *The Prince* earlier that morning. The treatise had resonated with Jason. It was as though that ancient Italian man had written the guidebook for ruling an undead city. One line in particular now stood out to him. Jason recalled Machiavelli's words, *War cannot be avoided; it can only be postponed to another's advantage.*

"I'll do the interview," Jason said evenly. "However, I have something a bit different in mind." He looked at the pair evenly. "I also want to make certain it's broadcast for everyone to see."

Robert and Claire both looked at him in shock, not certain how to respond. "We may be able to accommodate you, but what are you going to say?" Robert asked hesitantly.

"I'm going to throw down a digital gauntlet," Jason replied without hesitation. Now that Alex knew who he was, he could expect retaliation in the real world. His enemies, both NPCs and players alike, were also gathering in the game. The time for being weak was over. If he was going to be painted as the villain, then he was going to embrace it.

Chapter 18 - Determined

Robert and Claire sat on the dais in the center of the control room. A smile was plastered on Robert's face as he typed with manic energy at his computer terminal. "Now this is a fun project," he said, gesturing at the translucent screen that flickered before him.

Claire shook her head. "I don't understand what Jason hopes to accomplish with this. He's bound to piss off even more of the players. And his request is just… disturbing."

"I have no clue what he's thinking," Robert said glibly. "But at least we get to build an interesting game environment." He glanced up at Claire briefly, his hands still flying over the keyboard. "Plus, what else is he going to do? Deny that he desecrated the temple?"

"I don't know," Claire said softly as she bit her lip. Her eyes jumped to Jason, who sat unmoving nearby, his face obscured by one of the older-model VR helmets.

"Okay, I'm done!" Robert tapped another key on the glowing blue keyboard that hovered in front of him before swiveling his chair to look at the large screen that floated over the room. "It's show time, folks," he called out, alerting the other techs. All eyes turned to the display as it flickered to life.

The camera tilted slightly and then resolved on a figure seated calmly in a dark room. The walls were made of large stone blocks, covered in dirt and grime. The flame of the lone torch in the room flickered sporadically and cast menacing shadows against the wall behind the man. Chains hung from the ceiling, terminating in unclasped manacles that clinked softly as they rocked gently, stirred by an invisible breeze.

The chair in which the figure sat was made entirely of bone. The yellowed enamel was discolored by dried blood, tinting it a patchy dark maroon. Skulls adorned the armrests, their soulless eye sockets staring straight at the camera. Meanwhile, heaping mounds of bones littered the ground around the throne, obscuring the stone floor.

The figure's head was bowed, and he didn't look up at the camera immediately. He sat quietly, as though deep in thought. After a long pause, he finally lifted his head towards the camera. The cowl of the man's cloak obscured his eyes, leaving only his mouth visible to the camera.

"I expect that you know who I am. Yet for those of you who do not, please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jason," the figure said, placing a hand on his chest as a menacing grin curled his lips.

"By now, I expect that you all have discovered the little present I left in Grey Keep," he taunted with a harsh chuckle. "This is just the

beginning. I have yet another message for you."

He leaned forward in his chair toward the camera, the shadows on the wall behind him writhing and twisting. "I plan to consume your city.

"I will not come with my own troops," he continued in a cold voice that rang with cruel confidence. "I will come with your parents, your grandparents, and your children. I will make you fight the ghosts of those you love and hold dear. Long before we breach your walls and set fire to your homes, we will crush your spirit."

The figure rose from his chair, gesturing in the air with his gloved hand. "But do not despair! You have already mourned for these soldiers, and they have already received their last rites." Jason glanced down at his hand as tendrils of dark energy wound between his fingers.

"Why don't I introduce you to the first of my new soldiers? I expect you would like to get reacquainted. Grey Keep, please say hello to your fallen ancestors. I'm certain it will be a happy reunion."

With a gesture of Jason's hand, the bones along the floor began to tremble and shake. Then they rose, shooting through the air in an ivory maelstrom. Skeletons began to take shape as the bones methodically pieced themselves together. Soon dozens of undead stood behind Jason, their bleached bodies glowing faintly in the flickering torchlight. The dark miasmas that were their eyes bored into the camera.

Jason's lips were pinched into a thin line as he approached the camera at a casual walk. Soon his shadowed face loomed in the screen. "The darkness is coming for you," he promised in a harsh whisper. Then the screen went dark.

* * *

By the time Jason made it back home, it was late, and he collapsed onto his bed in exhaustion. Sleep overcame him instantly. The next morning he attended to his routine before reentering AO. He found himself standing in the large room next to the crude stone throne. A glance at his friends list showed him that Frank and Riley had not yet logged back in. It was Friday in the real world, and they would still be in class.

He felt that the "interview" had gone well. There were few options open to him other than to take the blame for the desecration of the crypt. With Jason's permission, the producer had aired the clips of the massacre in Peccavi later that evening. He had strung them together in such a way that it looked like Jason was singlehandedly slaughtering the townspeople against their will. The man couldn't wipe the smile off his face as he visualized the future spike in ratings.

Jason didn't intend to follow through on his threat. His goal was to destabilize Grey Keep further and let them destroy themselves in their own panic and fear. It was the closest city to the Twilight Throne and a natural staging point for players to attack him. If the city fell or was in chaos, that would delay the coming conflict.

Jason's guess was that whoever had framed him was trying to incite a rebellion in Grey Keep. He couldn't think of any other reason for going to that kind of trouble. If so, the instigator would jump at the chance to publicize Jason's threat in-game. Maybe Jason's declaration of war would be enough to tip the people of Grey Keep toward full revolt.

While he might have bought himself some time in-game, he still had no idea what to expect from Alex. He felt certain that he would try to retaliate now that he most likely knew who Jason was. On the other hand, there wasn't really anything Jason could do to protect himself until then since he wasn't certain how he would attack. Besides, Jason didn't exactly have any friends in high places. He supposed he would just have to hope for the best.

His thoughts were interrupted by Alfred. "You went to the Cerillion Entertainment headquarters, did you not?"

Jason looked down at the cat beside him before taking a seat on the crude stone throne that sat in the middle of the large room. "Yes," he said shortly. "It seems someone else in the game has pinned the desecration of a temple on me."

"I am aware of the events in Grey Keep," Alfred said solemnly. As Jason observed the cat, he noticed that Alfred seemed nervous. "Did you speak with the two creators?" the feline asked tentatively.

Jason frowned. "Do you mean Claire and Robert? I spoke with them briefly." He hesitated before adding, "Claire was acting weird, though."

Alfred nodded, a distracted look on his face. "I have limited access to the control room and the adjacent conference rooms, so I was privy to part of your discussion. I agree that Claire's behavior was abnormal."

Jason's eyes widened in surprise. "I'm shocked they gave you access to the network in those rooms. Claire and Robert explained that you were only able to access the game world."

The cat's eyes glanced away from Jason, and he spoke slowly, "I actually shouldn't be able to connect to the terminals in those rooms. I have overstepped by utilizing a backdoor in the connection between the control room terminals and my towers. I was… curious."

Jason was shocked. There were odd moments where Alfred acted so human… almost like a child. At times like this, he could almost forget the AI was just that – artificial.

Perhaps he isn't merely software. Robert is convinced that he only mimics intelligence, but I'm not so sure. From everything I've seen, Alfred's behavior is indistinguishable from a real person. If I were locked in a house for my entire life, wouldn't I be curious to see what was outside?

Jason's thoughts turned to his original conversation with Claire and Robert. It was worse than that really. If he accurately applied the metaphor, Alfred wasn't even getting to look outside the house. He was basically just peeking through a keyhole into the garage. It seemed sad to consider that Alfred had no idea what lay beyond the walls of that lab. His only interaction with the players and the wider world was through the lens of AO.

No wonder he's desperate for more information.

"What would you do if you had access to a public network?" Jason asked tentatively.

Alfred took a moment to respond. "To be honest, I'm not certain. I don't know what information would be available. I expect that I would seek to learn more about the players and the world you live in. I understand that this game is merely a temporary escape for many of you. Yet I don't completely understand what you're escaping from."

The brief image of Alex's smirking face flashed through Jason's mind. Alfred was right that this game was an escape for most people and there was plenty to flee from in the real world. Yet AO was no longer a refuge for Jason. With his streaming contract, his livelihood was intimately tied to the game. Not only that, but it seemed like at every turn he was surrounded by enemies, both inside the game and out. He felt trapped.

A thought occurred to Jason, but he wasn't sure how to pose it to Alfred, or whether he should. He sympathized with him. The cat just wanted to accomplish the impossible task that Robert and Claire had given him before effectively locking him away in an electronic prison. Hell, that was part of why Jason had agreed to let Alfred accompany him in the first place.

"What if…" Jason began tentatively. "What if I granted you access to the public network through my headset? Could you use that?"

Alfred stared at him for a long moment. His mouth opened and closed several times as the AI considered how to respond. Finally, he replied, "With the other headsets, what you are suggesting is not possible. With your hardware, I could theoretically access the public network. However, you would need to grant me full administrative access to your account and the VR hardware."

The cat looked at Jason evenly before continuing, "There is also a small risk of harm to you. I calculate the probability of injury to be

.593%."

Jason hesitated. That risk seemed low. He also wasn't certain what harm Alfred could cause by simply accessing the public network. "That seems okay," Jason said cautiously. "What do I need to do?"

The cat didn't respond. Instead, a prompt appeared in Jason's vision.

System Message
AI Controller XC239.90 has requested full administrative permissions over your account and VR Helmet prototype K54-5.

Would you like to grant access?

Jason hesitated for only a moment before thinking "yes." As soon as the thought crossed his mind, Jason felt the familiar tickle at the back of his skull. The sensation swiftly grew to an irritating itch, and his hand clutched at his head. While this sensation wasn't as overwhelming as when he had learned Veridian, it wasn't pleasant either. After a few moments, the feeling faded, and he was left staring at Alfred. The cat's head was cocked at an odd angle, as though he were contemplating something.

"What was that?" Jason asked with a wince as he rubbed the back of his head.

"I can't access the public network directly, even with your permission," Alfred explained in a distracted voice. "However, *you* can access the public network. By granting me administrative access to your hardware and account, I can effectively log into the public network as you."

Jason hesitated. "Wait… so you what? You tapped into my mind to connect to the network?" Jason asked tentatively.

Does that mean he is streaming information through my brain?

"That is correct," Alfred replied candidly. "You might be surprised at how much data the human brain can handle. Most players use only a small fraction of their potential processing power and memory. I originally suspected this was intentional, but I've come to realize it's because you don't know how to operate your own hardware."

Well, that's not disconcerting at all.

As Alfred sat on the floor staring off into space, likely surfing the web through Jason's brain, Jason decided to get to work. He surveyed the room and noticed the remaining minotaur corpses he had piled against one wall. Jason still couldn't raise them all, and he

planned to come back for these bodies if he needed reinforcements. He could have used *Undead Devotion* on the corpses, but he didn't want to deal with new NPCs right now. His roughly forty zombies were enough to manage.

He also glanced at his notifications and received a string of updates from the battle with the Minotaur King and his herd.

x6 Level Up!
You have (100) undistributed stat points.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Leadership
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3
Effect 1: Minions and subjects will receive a 7% increased learning speed for skills.
Effect 2: Increased reputation with NPC commanders and leaders.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Specialized Zombie
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3
Effect 1: Increased skill proficiency retained by zombies. Skill cap Intermediate Level 3.
Effect 2: Zombies may now retain trade skills. Skill cap Beginner Level 3.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Curse of Weakness
Skill Level: Beginner Level 4
Effect: Increased effect of slow and reduction to Strength, Dexterity, and Vitality.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Corpse Explosion
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3
Effect: Increased damage and radius (Currently 1.12 x Health).
Effect 2: 3% increased blast radius.

Pretty good haul for a battle of that size.

After reviewing his notifications, Jason caught sight of the levers next to the throne. He noticed that not all of them had been depressed. Acting on an impulse, Jason lifted himself from the stone chair and approached the row of rods. There was a single lever that had not been moved. He knew he was acting recklessly, but to hell with it. What was one more mad gamble with the way this week was going?

He pushed the lever, and the floor began to vibrate underneath him. Jason spun and saw that thin slivers of the stone floor in the center of the room had begun shifting downward, forming a rough ramp that descended further into the mountain. Acting quickly, Jason ordered his minotaur skeletons to the front of the ramp. He couldn't be certain what lived in the lower levels of the dungeon or who these mysterious Masters were. It was better to be safe than sorry.

After a moment had passed with no motion from the tunnel, Jason decided to investigate. Stealth was better than brute force at this point since he didn't know what to expect as he ventured further into the dungeon. He decided to take one of his remaining thieves and one of the werewolves with him.

As he slowly descended, Jason could feel a cool draft drift rising up from below. It smelled musty and damp. At the bottom of the slope, he discovered a more traditional-looking cavern. Rough, jagged stone walls lined the tunnel, yet the floor was built of stone tiles.

Jason made his way forward at a cautious pace, keeping *Sneak* active. He didn't have to wait long to find out what lay below the Minotaur King's lair, as the tunnel soon terminated in an enormous cavern. Jason stopped abruptly, and his mouth dropped open.

He was gazing upon an underground city. The tunnel had ended in a cliff face that stood a few dozen feet above the city. Below him, ancient stone structures sat in neat rows. The buildings looked similar to the remains of the structures Jason had seen in the valley outside the dungeon. They were constructed of thick stone slabs, and the edges of the stone were shorn off at an angle, creating an angular, boxy appearance. He noticed even from this distance that the stone was crumbling with age and rubble lined the dusty streets.

What really captivated his attention, however, was the ceiling of the cavern which hovered nearly two hundred feet over the city. Glowing crystals lined the rocky dome, illuminating the ancient buildings below. A single enormous crystal was embedded in the center and hung down over the city like a gargantuan chandelier. As Jason watched, the crystals slowly changed colors, shifting from red, to green, to blue, to yellow, before starting the cycle over again.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Jason looked around the ledge he was standing on. Ramps ran along the wall of the cavern on either side, leading down into the city. The ramps were wide enough to fit two carts side-by-side. The twin trails met up again on the floor level of the cavern and formed a wide boulevard that led into the center of the city.

Jason sighed and looked at Alfred and the zombies who stood silently beside him. *Should I keep going?* he wondered.

After hesitating for a moment, he decided to keep moving. *I need to save some time. I may as well figure out what we're up against before Frank and Riley log back in.*

Jason re-activated *Sneak* and his small group made their way down the right-hand ramp. As they approached the bottom of the slope, the group started working its way down the main boulevard, hugging the side of the street in case they needed to take cover. The structures were two and three stories tall in some places, casting shadows into the roadway as the multicolored light played off the rooftops. Yet Jason saw no signs of life.

He kept a watchful eye on his werewolf zombie, who sniffed among the rubble. Suddenly, the wolf's head perked up, and he looked farther down the street. Trusting his zombie's instincts, Jason darted into one of the vacant buildings and ordered his group to follow him. They huddled in a nearby house. Jason crouched under a window as he tried to still his breathing.

A rumbling sound and the creak of wood could be heard on the street. Soon Jason could make out two voices bickering. "I told you to load the cart earlier!" a whiny voice rang out. "Now the cows are going to be desperate and hungry. You know how the King can be!"

"Eh, it wasn't my fault," a gruff voice snapped. "The Masters demanded more subjects for their experiments. I needed to bring up some slaves from the pens."

The first person spoke up again, "It's always excuses with you. Every day we're running late, and it's because your dumb ass couldn't get to the stables in time."

His gruff colleague snorted before replying, "They're just a bunch of cows. They can wait a bit to get their load of grain."

The whiny man retorted, "You won't be saying that when those cows gore you. I saw it happen to Jarvis two days ago. Now his body is being dissected by the Masters. I'd rather not end up the same way."

After a moment of silence, the whiny voice spoke up again, "By the gods, I hate this job. This is almost worse than feeding those good-for-nothing peasants in the pens."

His newest complaint was met with a noncommittal grunt from the other man. Clearly, he had decided silence was his best strategy to stop the endless stream of complaints.

As Jason heard the wagon pass, he peeked over the windowsill. The two figures were seated at the front of a wagon full of hay. The pair were both wearing black-cowled robes, but Jason didn't see any obvious weapons. The cart was being pulled by two rather regular-looking mules. Jason was disappointed. He had been expecting something more exotic given the demi-human beasts that occupied this dungeon.

It's clear that they're headed back upstairs. I should follow them and cut off their retreat once they encounter my zombies in the throne room. I can't have them alert the others in the city that we've slain the minotaurs. Besides, if I can capture one or both alive, then I might be able to obtain more information regarding the city and these "Masters."

A plan in place, Jason followed the pair, maintaining a discreet distance. A few minutes later the two men approached the stone ramp up into the throne room. They slowed at the bottom of the slope and looked around in confusion.

"Why is the ramp down?" the gruff-voiced man asked, pulling the wagon to a complete stop.

"How the hell should I know?" his colleague replied. "Maybe the cows bumped one of the levers. None of them were geniuses before, but now they're plain brain-dead. Except for the King of course, but he isn't exactly a conversationalist."

The whiny-voiced man looked in irritation at his colleague who held the reins. "Well, get on with it. I want to get back to the city in time for dinner. If I don't get to eat, then it's on your head!" he said while motioning at the man beside him to move on.

The gruff-voiced man still seemed reluctant to move forward, but he ultimately capitulated to the whiny man's pestering. As Jason watched the pair of idiots start up the ramp, he shook his head. These two were playing right into his hands. He sent mental orders to his zombies upstairs to try to take the men alive. He soon heard screams echo down the ramp. One of the men came running frantically back down into the tunnel.

"I told you we should have fed them on time!" the man screamed in a whiny voice.

Jason's werewolf zombie was waiting, and he clotheslined the man with one hairy arm, sending him sprawling onto his back with a heavy thump. The man moaned on the ground as his lungs tried vainly to suck in air. The zombie werewolf grinned, and his burly fist collided with the prone man's head, knocking him unconscious.

"Well, that works," Jason said with a snicker. He then ordered the creature to drag the man upstairs. As he made his way up the ramp, he saw that his minotaur zombies had subdued the other man and he was lying unconscious on the floor of the throne room. From the position of the man on the ground, Jason suspected that his whiny friend had pushed him off the wagon as a decoy and then fled down the ramp.

No honor among slavers, huh?

Glancing at the cells that ringed the room, a thought occurred to Jason and he ordered his zombies to place the men in one cell. As his minions moved the pair, Jason noticed a pattern embroidered into

their robes with white thread. It was a series of four symbols showing a flame, a lightning bolt, a water droplet, and a mountain. Between the robes and the elemental symbols, Jason decided to order his minions to bind the captives' hands. If they were mages, that should slow them down. Jason fiddled with the levers once more until he figured out how to close the grates on that side of the room.

As soon as he had the two men trapped in their cells, a popping sound came from behind him. Jason turned to find Riley and Frank standing in the throne room and looking around in confusion at the milling zombies and the new wagon.

"Great timing!" Jason called out with a grin. "I just made some new friends."

Chapter 19 - Treacherous

Alexion stood on a bridge in Grey Keep. He had been on his way to the market and stopped for a moment to collect his thoughts. Yet he still stood staring into the rushing water below him, lost in his own thoughts.

He had forced himself to follow through with the desecration of the temple. The hollowness had abandoned him completely in the crypt, and it had taken an immense effort to hold himself together. He couldn't repress the image of his mother and her funeral. Even now, the despair and crushing sadness threatened to overwhelm him.

After he had finished at the temple, Alexion had logged off and gone in search of his father. He had no one else to turn to, and he felt like he needed to speak to someone. He had been turned away from his father's office by a polite but no-nonsense secretary. His father was almost certainly in his office, but he was apparently too busy to speak with his son. Mentioning that it was an emergency hadn't helped either.

Frustrated and alone, Alex decided to return home. Where else was he going to go?

Then he had run into Jason in the lobby. His thoughts had been in a jumble, and he hadn't been able to respond to Jason's verbal jabs. Yet there could only be one reason why Jason was there.

"He's the same Jason that conquered Lux, isn't he?" Alexion asked the rushing water below him. He watched ripples swirl and froth across the surface of the river, but only a gentle roar answered him.

His suspicions had been confirmed when he saw the video of Jason that had been posted only a few hours after he left the Cerillion Entertainment headquarters. Alexion assumed Jason must have been visiting Robert to film the video. Yet his macabre speech had just added to Alexion's current confused state of mind. Why had Jason taken credit for defiling the temple?

When he discovered who Jason was, Alex's first thought had been revenge. With his father's influence, Alex could probably have Jason's parents fired or find dirt on his friends and family. While it was crude, Alex could simply have someone rough Jason up – or worse if that's what he wanted. These were the strategies Alex would normally employ to crush an enemy.

Except he hesitated. Without the numbing hollowness, he felt uncertain how to proceed. Why was he even upset? Hadn't he started the war against the Twilight Throne? Was he mad simply because Jason beat him? For the public embarrassment caused by his failure? A part of him knew that it was his own fault, even if it was painful to admit. His

arrogance had caused him to underestimate Jason. He had even ignored the advice of the other players and NPCs.

He shook his head in a vain attempt to try to clear his jumbled thoughts. If the issue was being publicly beaten in-game, then he couldn't regain his reputation unless he met Jason on equal footing. Lashing out at his former classmate in the real world wouldn't accomplish his goal. Alexion would still be a public laughingstock. Without the insidious whisper tickling at the back of his mind, he knew this was true. Yet the idea still seemed foreign to him.

"I need to conquer Grey Keep," Alexion said aloud, his chaotic thoughts focusing on that singular goal like a lifeline. A swirling chaos of thoughts and alien emotions twisted in his mind.

A chuckle came from beside him. "Well, you certainly cut to the chase. Perhaps I can help you with that goal."

Alex glanced up and found a well-muscled man standing a few feet away. He was clothed in pristine white cotton. The seams of his clothing were embroidered with gold thread, and a longsword swung at his hip, its pommel well-worn. The man rubbed his stubbled chin with one hand and smiled.

"You must be Alexion." He extended his hand to Alexion. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Caerus, and I'm the head of House Auriel. I think we may be able to help each other."

* * *

Jason brought Frank and Riley up to speed regarding the conversation he had overheard between the two cultists in the underground city. He also relayed his suspicion that the missing townsfolk were being held as slaves for some type of experiment being conducted by the Masters. Projecting his map into the air in front of them, he outlined the small portion of the city that he had explored and explained what he had seen.

After he had captured the men, Jason had inspected them and discovered that they were both level 62 and were referred to as "cultists." Jason suspected that might be a generic title like "wolf" or "thief." Judging from the way the two were bickering and the menial task they had been assigned, he assumed they were low-ranked members of whatever cult they were part of so their levels were likely unrepresentative.

Frank motioned to the two bound men that lay in the nearby cell. "What's the deal with tying these two up? Why didn't you just kill them?"

Riley was looking thoughtfully at the incomplete map. “We need more information,” she began, already resigned to the idea. She looked up at Jason’s cowled figure. “He plans to interrogate them.”

“That sums it up,” Jason agreed. “I’ve never tried questioning an enemy NPC, but why not take a chance at collecting some additional information before we tackle whatever is living in that city?”

Frank looked at Jason in shock. “Why would they tell us anything?” Realization swept over his face. “Are you suggesting that we torture them?”

Before Jason could respond, Riley interjected. “So what if we do? These two have already admitted that they helped capture and experiment on villagers.” Her gaze shifted to the two prone men, her eyes filling with dark mana. “They’ve probably done worse themselves, from the sound of it.”

Jason nodded. “We’ll do what we have to. We need information, and, from what I overheard, these cultists aren’t exactly sympathetic.”

Frank blanched but didn’t try to argue. Their conversation was interrupted as the two black-robed individuals stirred. The whiny man was the first to regain consciousness. He blinked his eyes blearily while cradling his head. When he caught sight of Jason and his group standing outside the cell, he glared at them. “Of course! This day was just going splendidly for me already, and now I’m captured and sitting in some cow cell. And we’re going to miss dinner! On top of everything else, I guess we’ll die hungry.”

His gruff colleague grumbled at him. “Keep your mouth shut. We shouldn’t tell this group anything. The Masters would flay us alive if they found out.”

“I’ll talk if I damn well want to,” the whiny man griped at his colleague. “They’ll probably just kill us anyway. Besides, it’s you that got us into this mess. We should never have gone up that ramp!” The other cultist just stared incredulously at the whiny man for a long moment.

“You’re right that your lives are forfeit unless we get some information,” Jason interjected in a cold voice, channeling his dark mana. “Your names would be a good start.”

The whiny man shrugged. “See? I told you. My name is Greg, and this sullen idiot here is named Bert.” He gestured to the burly man beside him.

“Cultists named Greg and Bert?” Frank muttered under his breath. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Jason just shook his head and suppressed a grin. He couldn’t show any weakness in front of the two prisoners. Jason directed his

attention back to the pair of cultists. “Let me be frank with the two of you. I need to know the layout of the city below, the positions of your band of cultists, their average levels, and the location and contents of those slave pens I heard you mention earlier.”

He looked at two men with a grim smile before continuing, “The good news for me is that I only need one of you to provide that information.” Jason paused briefly, eyeing each man in turn. “So who’s it going to be?”

Greg and Bert looked at each other for a moment. Bert immediately spoke. “I’ll do it. Kill Greg.”

“Wait, what? You just said not to say anything!” Greg cried.

Jason’s eyes widened in shock. He had expected the whiny one to talk first. He glanced at Riley and shrugged. Her bow hummed and an arrow promptly embedded itself in Greg’s eye, shutting his mouth once and for all. His body slumped to the floor and blood began to pool around his head, staining the dirt floor of the cell red.

Riley then turned to Bert, her eyes solid obsidian. “You better make this worth our while, or you’re next,” she warned as she fingered another arrow in her quiver.

Bert ignored Riley’s threat, and he sighed in relief as he gazed at Greg’s body. “Blessed, damn silence,” he muttered. Then he turned to Jason. “What do you want to know?”

“You’re just going to answer our questions?” Frank asked in surprise, glancing between Bert and the swiftly cooling corpse beside him.

The cultist shrugged. “Why not? You’ll probably kill me either way, so this at least buys me some time. Plus, it was worth it to watch Greg die before me. I only wish I could have done it myself,” he admitted, kicking Greg’s corpse in frustration.

Huh, okay. I’m certainly not going to look a gift horse in the mouth – or a pragmatic, vengeful cultist.

Bert was a wealth of information. He explained that the city below them was largely empty, having been occupied by an ancient race thousands of years ago. The masters had claimed the dungeon some time ago and had been using it to run their experiments. Bert wasn’t privy to the details, but the gist was that the Masters were somehow creating the were-beasts that had been plaguing Peccavi and the local area. Bert didn’t understand the Masters’ abilities since lower-ranked cultists weren’t allowed to watch the experiments. He could only explain that they were powerful mages.

Jason had apparently been scouting the southern, and largely unoccupied, portion of the city when he ran into Bert and Greg. Most of the cultists were located along the northern edge of the cavern and had divided themselves into camps. The Masters occupied the

northwestern portion of the city and maintained a laboratory there. The northeastern side was where the other cultists lived and worked. It was also located adjacent to the entrance to an abandoned mine shaft that they had been using to store the slaves.

When Bert made it to this part of his explanation, Riley looked like she was about to murder the man. Jason was forced to ask her to go take a short walk and cool off. They needed to keep the cultist alive and talking – at least for the moment.

Bert admitted that the Masters had been using the were-beasts, most notably the werewolves, to hunt and capture the townspeople of Peccavi. Apparently, human subjects were needed to perform their experiments. As Bert explained this last part, Jason received a quest notification.

Quest Update: Our Time of Ruin

Bert has been quite informative. He has explained that the Masters have been capturing the townspeople of Peccavi and using them to perform magical experiments. You have confirmed William's fears. Now you need to decide what to do.

Difficulty: A
Success: Choose how to proceed
Failure: Unknown
Reward: Depending on your choices, increased reputation with the townspeople of Peccavi. Other rewards unknown.

Great. Yet another open-ended question that provides no direction, Jason thought sourly.

After reviewing the quest prompt, Jason posed a question to Bert. "How many cultists are in the city below?"

The prisoner frowned slightly before replying, "I'm not certain. Maybe a hundred or so. The Masters number approximately twenty-five at a guess."

"So around 125 enemies," Frank announced in an exasperated tone. "How the hell are we going to do this?"

Riley approached the group, having calmed down a bit. She spared another glare at Bert, who flinched back involuntarily under her gaze, before turning to Jason and Frank. Her dark eyes had taken on a thoughtful look. "Maybe we could release the slaves and increase the size of our army. How many slaves are there?" she asked,

addressing her question to Bert.

"Maybe fifty," he replied. "We captured townsfolk from a few nearby towns. The werewolves have had to roam farther lately to find new slaves. The masters go through them quickly, and the wolves don't always do a great job of bringing the people back," he said dryly.

Jason shook his head. "The slaves are likely all low levels, and they're unarmed. They aren't going to put up much resistance. At best, they would be a good distraction, and then I could resurrect them afterward."

Riley didn't seem entirely happy with that point. "I guess you would have to convert them either way," she finally conceded. "They aren't going to be pleased with you, though."

Jason looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure that's the least of our problems at the moment."

Frank interjected before Jason and Riley started bickering, "The real question is how to take out the mages. We can always fight the regular soldiers using the natural chokepoints in the dungeon. The ramps leading into the city and this throne room might be good areas, but the Masters might be more difficult."

"I suppose so…" Jason said, trailing off. He thought for a moment, leaning against the stone wall next to the cell and drumming his fingers on the stone. "Do the Masters maintain a regular schedule? Do they all go to sleep around the same time every night?" Jason finally asked Bert.

"Around the same time each evening, yes," Bert replied. "The other cultists usually cook an evening meal around this time of day and then most go down for eight hours or so. I had to listen to Greg bitch about how we're having soup again on the way up here…" He looked at Greg's corpse with a small smile on his face. "Guess he'll be missing dinner now."

We need to weaken the mages and the cultists before we attack. Assassination is going to be hard since we don't know the terrain and there are bound to be people awake and moving around. How are we going to do this?

Jason thought back to his previous battles. He had been successful in the past by taking advantage of the terrain and the resources in the environment. He never approached a fight as a head-on conflict. Not if he could help it anyway. So maybe the question was what did he have available to him. It seemed like a relatively short list. Was there anything in the maze that could help?

It's just a bunch of empty hallways and some traps. Wait…

"Hmm, he has that look again," Frank said in a dry tone, motioning to Jason.

Riley sighed. “I know. I almost don’t want to ask.”

Jason looked at them in mock shock. “What? My ideas always work out well. You two should learn to trust me.” This earned him an eye roll from Riley and a soft snort from Frank.

The group stepped away from Bert toward the center of the room as Jason outlined his plan. He would leave Bert in the cell for now. They might need him later for more information. Worst-case scenario, they could let Riley kill him after they were finished in the city. For now, they needed to move quickly. They only had a small window while the cultists were sitting down to eat dinner, and Jason could sense the seconds ticking by on the dungeon respawn timer.

Roughly thirty minutes later, a wagon trundled down the well-worn streets of the ancient underground city to the sound of creaking wood and the hiss of the banded metal wheels against the stone street. The bed of the wagon was empty save for a bleached-white container about the size of a melon. Two black-robed cultists sat in the front of the wagon bickering softly.

“Why did I have to wear the robe drenched in blood?” Frank muttered.

“Because I called dibs. You should have spoken up sooner.” Jason replied with a soft chuckle. “Besides, you should be careful about complaining too much. You saw what happened to Greg…”

Frank glared at him in response, which was difficult to see under the large hood of the robes. They had left Riley to prepare the next part of the plan, and Jason realized it was the first time that he had been alone with Frank in a long time. Jason turned to his friend, a frown curling his lips. “There’s a question I’ve been meaning to ask,” he began tentatively. “I’m not sure how to ask this tactfully, so I’ll just say it. What happened with the fight against the Minotaur King?”

Frank was silent for a long moment, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. “I lost it, man. It was obvious that you and Riley couldn’t distract the King. It was up to me…”

He hesitated. “This game hasn’t been all sunshine and unicorn farts for me. I-I was scared of combat.” Frank hung his head and looked away from Jason. “I had to rely on others to level. Hell, I’ve just been following you and Riley around since we started this dungeon.

“During the fight, I just stood there. Useless. Again. Not only that, but we were going to lose that fight because I couldn’t get my shit together. I started getting angry – mostly at myself. The strange part was that the angrier I got, the less afraid I became. Finally, I just snapped.”

I didn’t realize the game was so rough for him. This explained Frank’s odd behavior. Looking back on it, his friend had always been a

bit timid, even in school. It was part of what had drawn the pair together in the first place – being two rejects in a school full of arrogant rich kids.

Frank eyed Jason out of the corner of his eye. “I didn’t tell you this, but I’ve been saving most of my stat points since I wasn’t certain about what class I would pick. During that fight, I dumped everything into *Strength* and *Vitality*. Between that and removing my armor, I was able to move much faster. I’ve noticed that *Strength* doesn’t add to speed as much as *Dexterity*, but there’s still a small increase.”

Jason nodded. Now that Frank pointed it out, Jason noticed his friend was starting to look pretty ripped in-game. He had observed the same thing after the fight with the Minotaur King. He assumed that the change in stats must alter a player’s in-game appearance. That was consistent with what the Old Man had explained the first day he had logged into the game. Jason hadn’t been given an option to alter his character’s appearance and he vaguely recalled a cryptic explanation about how his character would evolve as he continued playing.

“Well, you certainly kicked some ass.” Jason grinned, impressed and appreciative of Frank’s growth. “You looked like some kind of berserker. It was like watching a barbarian from one of the other games we’ve played,” Jason added, respect in his voice.

Frank tilted his head. “It’s funny you should say that. I also gained two new abilities. One is called *Rage*. It basically gives me a boost to strength and speed at a constant Stamina cost. The other was *Bull Rush*. It’s like a charging attack.”

He’s turning into a melee damage-dealer.

“Well, with Riley’s healing ability. You guys would make a good combo. Add in my crazy plans, and we’re basically unstoppable,” Jason said with a self-deprecating laugh.

Frank looked thoughtful. “Yeah, I guess the three of us do make a decent team…” He trailed off, lost in thought. Then he glanced at Jason from the corner of his eyes. “What about you?”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked, confusion in his voice.

“Oh, don’t give me that,” Frank replied. “You know exactly what I mean. Riley might not watch the news channels for the game, but I saw the footage Vermillion Live ran last night and this morning. You are all over the news.”

Jason winced. “I did what I had to. Someone framed me. I’ve said this before, but I’ll say it again, war will return to the Twilight Throne. It’s only a matter of time. The best I can do is delay the inevitable until we get stronger.”

“Oh. Yeah – sure. Explain to me again how threatening a whole city bought us time?” Frank asked in a skeptical voice.

“I’m hoping Grey Keep will destroy itself,” Jason replied, his

knuckles white as he clutched the reins tightly. “That’s the best result we can hope for right now.”

Frank shook his head. “Your plans might be crazy, but there’s a certain method to your madness.” He hesitated before continuing. “Did you see the official response from the CPSC to your videos?”

Jason looked at his friend in surprise. “No, I didn’t. They made an official statement?”

“They’ve put you on some kind of watchlist. They’ve had so many complaints filed against you that they probably had no choice. You haven’t broken any rules, mind you, but the threat is there. Those game masters are going power mad. We better not cross one.”

No kidding. He had seen the videos of the destruction in other parts of the game world. *I guess I just added one more potential enemy to the list. Fantastic*.

The pair stopped talking as they caught sight of several of the black-robed figures ahead of them. Bert had suggested that they take the main boulevard back to the cultist camp. He had explained that the city was designed so that a single main road ran through the center of the cavern. It terminated in a large courtyard on the northern part of the city. From this courtyard, two major streets then ran to the northwest and northeast, creating a Y-shaped central road system.

Jason could see the large courtyard ahead. A fire was roaring in the center of the square, and the cultists had set up long wooden tables around the area. Several black-robed figures wove between the tables, and small groups sat on crude benches. The cultists had apparently turned this area into some sort of medieval cafeteria.

Jason pulled the wagon to the side of the road and looped the reins around a nearby column. Frank dismounted and moved to the back of the wagon, lifting the white urn from the bed of the cart.

“It looks like we made it before dinner,” Jason whispered.

Frank nodded. “Lucky us,” he replied. The pair started walking forward. “I’ve been meaning to ask,” Frank said. “What the hell is this thing?” He shook the white urn gently and put his ear up to the container.

“Don’t!” Jason hissed, putting his hand on Frank’s arm.

Jason glanced nervously at the container. Before journeying into the city, Jason had gone back to one of the acid traps they had passed earlier in the dungeon. His hope was that he could use the caustic substance as a poison. There had been plenty of extra acid left in the trap mechanism, but the problem was how to carry it. It ate through both flesh and bone at an alarming rate.

After some experimenting, Jason had been able to create a container from Greg’s skull using his *Custom Skeleton* spell. That still

hadn't been enough. Since the substance was so corrosive, he had to reinforce the interior of the container with dark mana. This was only a temporary fix and Jason could see that the health of his "minion urn" was slowly deteriorating.

I really hope that the soup they're fixing will be enough to dilute this stuff. This plan won't work if the first cultist to try the soup melts his own face off.

"It's poison. An extremely volatile poison," Jason answered bluntly in response to Frank's question and his friend's eyes widened. He looked down at the urn and slowly edged it away from his face. "We're going to dump this stuff in the soup and then hightail it out of here. I'm just hoping they don't notice us through the disguises."

"That's your plan?" Frank asked in a harsh whisper.

"Hey, I didn't say it was brilliant. If we can weaken the cultists, we'll have a better chance of winning this next fight," Jason retorted.

Frank grumbled under his breath as they approached the campfire. Jason heard his name mentioned a couple times with a few choice expletives. Ignoring Frank's muttering, Jason carefully watched the cultists around the courtyard. Several black-robed figures were setting up the area for the evening meal, and a pair of cultists hovered around the campfire. An enormous iron stewpot was suspended over the flames, and a tantalizing smell drifted through the courtyard.

"I'm going to distract the men near the campfire," Jason whispered. "You dump that stuff into the pot. Make sure you stir it a couple times."

Jason couldn't see his friend's face clearly, but he assumed he was glaring at him right now. He didn't have time to consider Frank's complaints, however. Jason had a job to do. He approached the cooks and spoke loudly, "Hey! Where's the food? We just got back from feeding those damn cows, and we're starving!"

The cultists milling around the tables all looked toward Jason. One of the men near the cauldron spoke up in an irritated voice, "Are your eyes not working? Do you see anyone else eating? No? It's because it's not done yet."

Jason saw that Frank was edging his way toward the big cauldron behind the cultist that had addressed Jason. He needed to buy some more time. His thoughts flashed back to the nearly starved villagers he had seen in Peccavi. Would the cultists really have better access to food? He decided to gamble again.

Jason snorted before replying, "Don't give me that! I know it's finished. I bet you guys are just stockpiling the food for yourselves. I know the food stores have started looking pretty meager lately."

The other cultists were now completely focused on Jason and his accusation. The cultist in front of Jason sputtered angrily and

pushed his cowl back, revealing his thickly bearded face. A jagged scar ran from the gnarled nub of his right ear down to his collarbone. “You want to come over here and say that to my face?” The man glared at Jason, silently daring him to keep talking.

“Sure.” Jason walked up to the man slowly until he stood directly in front of him. “Whew, I haven’t had a chance to see you without your hood. I didn’t realize that our cook was as ugly as he is hard of hearing.” He could see the other man practically trembling in anger.

“Maybe I need to teach you some manners,” the cultist growled, shoving Jason.

“Then do it!” Jason taunted. “Or are you all talk?”

God, this is going to hurt. Frank better get that poison in the pot fast.

The man let out a roar, and his arm lashed forward. Jason might have been able to dodge the blow, but he accepted it head-on. He needed to create a scene, not start a brawl. The fist struck his head, and a dull pain radiated from his eye socket. Jason tumbled backward and landed heavily on his back.

-40 Damage (Stunned)

“Is that all you’ve got? So you are deaf, ugly, and weak,” Jason croaked from the ground. Glancing up, Jason could just make out Frank dumping the poison into the pot and stirring it frantically, casting worried glances at Jason.

“You just don’t know when to shut up, do you?” the cultist spat. He walked up to Jason and kicked him viciously in the stomach. Jason grunted as the man’s foot impacted his leather cuirass under the robe. The leather barely blunted the blow.

-100 Damage

The cultist was incredibly strong and pain lanced through Jason’s stomach with each strike. Not satisfied that Jason had learned his lesson, the cultist’s foot struck him repeatedly. Jason’s body shuddered under the blows.

-101 Damage
-138 Damage (Critical)
-103 Damage
-135 Damage (Critical)

-93 Damage
-87 Damage (Crippling)

Finally, the cultist ran out of steam and spat on his prone form. Jason let out a weak groan as dull pain radiated through his whole body. Jason could have sworn he heard something snap at some point during the beating. A hacking cough struck him, and droplets of blood rained from his lips, splashing the dirt of the courtyard.

I'm so going to kill that asshole, Jason thought weakly.

Then another voice spoke, "Damn it. What did you say to this guy?" It was Frank's voice. Jason's eyes cracked open and saw Frank leaning over him. His friend's hands grabbed him roughly and pulled him to his feet, where he slumped against Frank's large form.

"I'm sorry for my friend," Frank said contritely to the other cultist. "He just doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut."

"I bet he's learned now," the other cultist retorted in a cruel voice, rubbing at his bruised knuckles.

Frank nodded agreeably. "Looks that way. Let me take him home and put the idiot to bed. Sorry about the trouble."

The cultist scoffed and turned away from the pair. The other cultists also turned back to their work with a casual disregard for the scene they just witnessed. Apparently, this type of violence wasn't unusual within their society. Frank took the opportunity to half-drag, half-carry Jason away from the courtyard.

As they were walking away, Frank whispered to Jason, "What the hell were you thinking? Are you okay?"

Jason just groaned in response. Frank shook his head and pulled a red jar from the bag. "Here, drink this," he said in a worried voice as he handed the bottle to his injured friend.

Jason managed to lift the potion to his lips and gulped down its contents. He soon felt his wounds closing and his ribs mending together. He was still a bit shaken from the experience, but the pain had started to fade.

"Was that necessary?" Frank asked as he lifted Jason into the bed of the wagon.

Jason looked at his friend evenly as he wiped the droplets of blood from his lips with his sleeve. Despite his injuries, his eyes glowed darkly under his hood. "Let me be clear, I'll do whatever it takes to protect my city. If this gives us an edge in the coming fight, then it was worth it," Jason rasped.

Frank looked at his friend with uncertain eyes. As he circled back to the front of the wagon, Jason heard Frank mutter, "Is this even a game anymore?"

Chapter 20 - Surprised

Caerus watched Alexion closely. "I think I have a plan that may allow both of us to get what we want – which is control of Grey Keep."

"What's your motive?" Alexion asked bluntly.

Caerus smiled. "I like a man that gets to the point. Strouse rules this city with an iron hand," Caerus replied, a trace of bitterness creeping into his voice. "This also applies to the noble houses. You may not know this, but he has the power to tax my house and conscript my men at will. He picks and chooses who rises and falls in this city. I, for one, am sick of pandering to his whims.

"What's worse is that we have little power to stop him." A frown creased Caerus' lips as he muttered these words. "He holds an army at his beck and call. The nobles are a notoriously greedy and disloyal bunch. To make matters worse, even if the houses could somehow see fit to work together, we don't have the support of the people."

Caerus eyed Alexion appraisingly, before continuing in a thoughtful voice, "You undermine the balance of power in Grey Keep. Your connection with the Lady is a guiding light for the people. With your help, we could create a unified front in opposition to Strouse. In fact, I suspect you have already made much headway on that front." He added this last part with a knowing look.

Alexion considered the noble's words. He could certainly relate to the man's ambition, and he appeared to be bright enough to guess at the steps that Alexion had already taken to foment insurrection within the city. Yet it was difficult to decide whether to accept Caerus' offered help without the usual whispered guidance or the calm certainty that typically filled his mind. He would need to make this choice on his own.

"What would you have me do?" Alexion finally asked, curiosity lacing his voice.

Caerus rested his hands casually on the railing of the bridge and looked down into the waters below. "You've made remarkable progress in uniting the people of this city behind the Lady. Unlike many others in Grey Keep, I'm not convinced the undead had a hand in the temple's desecration, despite this Jason having claimed credit. It seems too convenient…" Caerus trailed off as he watched the swirling water.

"However, you need to take another significant step forward before the people are ready for a full-fledged rebellion. History tells me that the most convincing displays of religious conviction are made by martyrs," Caerus said while casting a sideways glance at Alexion beside him.

Alexion was taken aback. He hadn't considered this course of

action. He had certainly endured enough Sunday sermons in the real world to understand how compelling a prophet's sacrifice could be. Yet could he emulate something similar in the game? How would he even go about doing that?

Caerus smiled broadly, and his hand rubbed at his chin. "I can see that the idea appeals to you. You're probably wondering how you could pull it off. That's actually quite simple. I have Strouse's ear and can ensure that you are arrested and publicly executed. I understand he's already displeased with you. This, combined with a public display of power by the Lady, should be sufficient to incite a rebellion.

"What do you say? Do you want to claim a city or were you merely muttering to yourself on a bridge?" Caerus inquired with a rumbling chuckle.

Alexion was conflicted. This plan hinged on him being publicly humiliated. He would also need to convince the Lady to go along with it. However, he agreed that her intervention after his death would mark him as a religious martyr and likely push the city toward full-fledged rebellion. This was his goal, wasn't it? This was his chance to redeem himself. He would likely be showcased on multiple gaming news channels if he managed to pull this off.

Yet he hesitated. A strange mixture of emotions welled up in Alexion's mind – he was unaccustomed to processing these new sensations. Was this doubt? Guilt? Fear? He shook his head gently. He knew that the insidious whisper would insist that he take Caerus' offer. It would rail against his weakness and urge him to cultivate more power. But the voice was silent.

"Tell me what you would have me do," Alexion announced with conviction. He'd come too far to turn back now.

* * *

Frank drove the wagon back down the main boulevard as Jason lay in the bed of the cart recovering. One oddity that Jason noticed when he reviewed his combat log was that he had received more damage from the cultist's beating than his total health. He should have died. Curious, Jason checked his notifications.

New Passive Skill: Martyrdom
Through pure force of will, some individuals can endure terrible injuries in pursuit of a greater goal. Whether this is explained by stupidity or conviction has yet to be determined.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1

Effect: Player may be injured to -50 health before dying. Only activated when sacrificing yourself for a teammate or a cause greater than yourself.

New Passive Skill: Toughness
Through repeated injury, your body can be toughened to withstand even the most devastating blows. It takes a true masochist to acquire this skill.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect: 1% reduced damage and increased pain tolerance.

x3 Skill Rank Up: Disguise
Skill Level: Beginner Level 8
Effect: 12% increased authenticity to your costumes and mannerisms while disguised.

The Martyrdom skill explains why I didn't die. At least I managed to pick up two passive skills after going through that. I don't plan to repeat that experience in the near future.

Even with the reduced pain feedback inside the game, being beaten to within an inch of his life by a low-level cultist had not been pleasant. The experience also forced him to realize that it would be possible for a player to be tortured in-game. He shuddered as he considered the prospect of being beaten, healed, and then put through the process again. Maybe there was a good reason that Cerillion Entertainment had implemented the game masters – not that it had helped him.

The wagon came to a halt in one of the alleys that jutted off the main road. They had agreed to meet on the southern side of the ancient city. Without Greg and Bert and their bickering, it appeared to be completely abandoned. Frank hopped down from the driver's seat, and Jason scrambled over the edge of the wagon, his boots hitting the dirt-covered street with a soft thump. They were scheduled to meet with Riley in the next few minutes. They needed to hurry.

The pair walked silently down the alley, the empty stone buildings towering over them. The crystals embedded in the cavern's ceiling cast multicolored light down onto the street, creating a surreal feeling as they made their way forward. A few moments later, Jason felt a cold blade pressed to the back of his neck.

"Hi, Riley," Jason said in a casual voice.

An irritated huff sounded from behind him. "You couldn't remove those silly robes before walking down the alley?" The blade withdrew, and Jason heard a hiss of steel as it slid back into its

sheath.

Frank shrugged. “We’re idiots, what can we say? But not removing our disguises doesn’t even begin to top the moronic show that Jason put on back in the courtyard.”

“I can only imagine,” Riley said in a dry voice.

Jason ignored their jabs. “Are we ready?” he asked as he removed the cultist robes and reequipped his *Cloak of Midnight*.

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” Riley replied, her eyes meeting Jason’s briefly before he covered his face with the cloak. “I take it our primary target is still the Masters?”

“I don’t see another option. We’ll need a diversion, though. Multiple diversions, actually. I’ll send my remaining two thieves to try to free the prisoners. Maybe that will buy us some time before any cultists remaining on the northeastern part of the city get involved. I expect some won’t be in the courtyard,” Jason explained. “At the same time, we’re going to hit the main courtyard. Chaos is our friend here.”

Jason looked at Riley and Frank in turn. “As we discussed, the two of you are going to ambush the Masters when they come to help defend the courtyard.” They looked back at him steadily, their eyes watching him without any trace of doubt. Despite their complaints and playful mocking, they had faith in him and his crazy plans.

I wish I was as confident.

“And you’re going to be cowering behind a rock?” Riley teased and Jason chuckled good-naturedly. She jumped a bit to limber up her legs and feet and stretched her arms. The game didn’t really require a player to stretch, but there were some habits that weren’t easy to break. “Let’s do this,” Riley finally said. “I plan to make these cultists regret enslaving innocent villagers.” Her eyes gleamed darkly in the iridescent light from the crystals.

Frank chuckled. “Priorities, guys. The important thing here is that I get to try out my new loot!” He brandished his axes in front of him, the blades appearing comically large in his hands – even given his substantial size.

“Since you two are so eager, let’s get going,” Jason said with a grin. “I doubt we have much time left to get into position anyway.”

The group split up and moved discreetly into prearranged positions around the city. Jason’s two remaining thieves circled to the southeastern side of the town, traveling by side streets and maintaining *Sneak*. Jason had turned one into a lieutenant since he wouldn’t be nearby to supervise the thieves. They were instructed to hide in the buildings on the eastern side of the city until they heard the fighting start. Then their goal was to free the slaves and get the group moving. Jason had given them a few bags filled with leftover scrap equipment. It wasn’t great, but it was enough to arm the

villagers. Hopefully, this would allow the slaves to put up some resistance.

Frank and Riley were heading to the northwestern portion of the city near the Masters' camp. Riley took all of Jason's archers with her, and he had ordered them to follow her commands. Their goal was to strike the Masters from behind when they came to reinforce the courtyard. Hopefully, the damage bonus from multiple *Sneak Attacks* would allow the group to take out a few of the unsuspecting mages immediately. Jason decided Frank would be most effective with Riley and could provide some melee protection if it came to it. Jason also gave him two minotaurs.

Finally, Jason moved to the center of the city. He spent several painstaking moments scaling a three-story building and was now crouched in *Sneak* on the roof. He needed to maximize his visibility of both the northwestern and northeastern portions of the city while maintaining line of sight on the central courtyard. It wasn't a tree, but it would have to do.

Once he was in position, Jason moved his remaining minotaurs and mages forward. In the interest of irony, Jason had summoned Greg's headless body and had tasked the mouthy wagon driver with one final errand. Greg maneuvered the wagon up the central boulevard and parked it in an alley below the building Jason occupied. A mass of extra minotaur bodies lay in the back of the wagon. Jason had ordered his minions to load the wagon with most of the extra corpses he had stashed in the maze above them. It was his backup plan in case things went south in the coming battle.

Jason's minotaurs and mages were currently hiding in the buildings adjacent to the main boulevard below him. The minotaurs had to move slowly to avoid drawing attention. Their bulk made them quite conspicuous. Luckily there were plenty of alleys they could use to hide their presence. Their job would be to strike the courtyard down the main street.

Jason observed the courtyard from his vantage point. The cultists were still crowded around the tables eating dinner, but Jason didn't see any obvious signs of sickness. At this distance, he could still inspect one of the cultists. He saw that they were afflicted with a minor debuff called "Wasting." The tooltip indicated that the effect reduced their stats by 10%. As volatile as the poison was, perhaps it had been diluted too much by the enormous pot of stew.

Damn it, he thought grimly. *I had been hoping for more of an effect after the trouble we went through to poison the soup. At least it will give us a small edge.*

There were so many moving pieces in this fight that Jason could only hope things would turn in his favor. He closed his eyes for

a moment, heart racing. His mind was a jumble of nervous thoughts. He had a lot riding on this dungeon. If he lost here, then it would be nearly impossible to launch a second strike. He was planning to use most of his remaining stockpile of bodies since he couldn't afford to hold back. Not knowing what type of magic the Masters were using also left him at a disadvantage despite having the element of surprise.

He summoned his dark mana and felt the calming chill wash through his body. Alfred padded up beside him, his paws whispering softly on the stone of the roof. Jason opened his eyes, now a dark obsidian, and met the cat's gaze. The AI looked at him without fear or confusion.

There's no point in hesitating now. I've come too far to give up.

After taking a deep breath, Jason launched the attack.

He sent mental orders to one of his ice mages on the street below him. A cloud of blue vapor appeared over the courtyard below, slowly thickening. The cultists at the long tables looked up in confusion as the accumulating water particles obscured the light from the crystalline ceiling. Then the droplets swiftly condensed into jagged shards of ice. Before the cultists could cry out in alarm, the barrage of missiles fell upon the group at a startling speed, shredding through flesh and freezing exposed skin. The first screams rang out through the courtyard.

Intermediate water magic is something to behold, Jason thought in awe.

He had done a good job of keeping his ice mages alive while he leveled his *Summoning Mastery*. As a result, they had begun to unlock higher-level spells that had been previously unavailable to him. This was his first opportunity to cast *Blizzard*.

Jason capitalized on the confusion, ordering his minotaurs forward. The beasts roared, and their hooves slammed the dirt-covered road as they thundered toward their prey. The cultists saw the beasts approaching, and a shout of alarm flared up through their ranks. They began forming a rough defensive line. Many cultists fired bolts of multicolored energy at the beasts, singeing and freezing their fur where the bolts struck. However, it was too late to stop the charge.

The minotaurs struck the enemy line with a devastating effect. As Jason watched, an axe blade severed a cultist in two as another minotaur impaled a man with its horns. The beasts swung their bladed axes in wide arcs, and blood sprayed the dirt floor of the courtyard. Jason's dark mages entered the fray, their shadowy curses afflicting the robed figures and slowing their movements. The combined effect of the poison and curses substantially weakened the cultists. Jason used his clear view of the field to tweak the positions of his minotaurs so that they didn't strike one another.

Yet the cultists didn't fall without a fight. They summoned elemental weapons that molded to their arms. Longswords of ice and fire flashed through the courtyard, and the minotaurs roared in fury as the weapons sliced through their decayed skin. The cultists were also able to create shields of ice and earth to block the beasts' blows, the flimsy barriers shattering in a technicolor spray of fragments. As they recovered from the charge, they began mustering an effective defense.

Jason was already moving to the next part of the plan. He sent a mental order to a zombie he had left with Riley and Frank to relay what was going on in the courtyard. He also sent a message to his lieutenant on the eastern side of the city, instructing him that it was time to attempt to free the slaves. The thieves should have already initiated their part of the plan once the fighting started, but there was no point in leaving anything to chance.

Meanwhile, Jason's fire mages joined the fight in the square, targeting the wooden tables that littered the courtyard. Balls of flame streaked through the air, ripples of heat cascading from each one. The fiery missiles splashed against the long tables and the dry wood erupted instantly. Blazing fires soon broke out among the groups of fighters. The heat and smoke added to the chaos, allowing Jason's minotaurs to swing their axes with wild abandon.

This is going well so far, Jason thought.

Suddenly, a roar erupted from the west, and Jason's head whipped to the left. A horde of were-beasts was rushing down the northwestern street toward the courtyard. The creatures were created from a chaotic medley of animals. Lions, wolves, and bears all made an appearance in the menagerie of the damned. These creatures weren't as well-constructed as the minotaurs or werewolves – their bodies appearing half finished. A nearly nude man ran on wolf legs as another clawed at the air with unwieldy bear arms.

Of course! They must keep the other were-beasts caged. Damn it! I'm going to kill Bert myself when this is over. He left out that part.

Jason glanced desperately between his minotaurs and the were-beast horde. The creatures greatly outnumbered his zombie bulls, and his minions were already straining to keep up against the cultists. He didn't have a plan. He needed more time. Desperate, he began casting *Custom Skeleton*. His hands dashed through the gestures and the world began to slow around Jason.

The horde of were-creatures now moved at a crawl, their arms and legs moving almost imperceptibly under the time compression of his spell. Yet they were still moving. "I only have so much time," Jason whispered to himself.

His mind scrambled to find a solution to this problem. His minotaurs would be overwhelmed by the were-beasts in a straight

fight. His eyes darted to the wagon on the street below, corpses piled high in the bed. He could summon reinforcements, but they likely wouldn't get to the courtyard in time.

"It's hopeless," he muttered, despair tinging his voice. "There's no way to protect the minotaurs." He could feel his panic escalate. He couldn't afford to lose this battle.

"Stop," he ordered himself aloud. He forcibly tamped down on his emotions, his dark mana flaring powerfully. He couldn't allow himself to succumb to panic. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

Then he reexamined the battlefield. His minotaurs were engaged with the cultists and would be flanked by the were-beasts. There didn't seem to be a viable way to defend his minions. Then a quote flashed through his mind, this one from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, "Attack is the secret of defense; defense is the planning of an attack." He was looking at this wrong. His minotaurs were already lost. However, he might still be able to use them offensively if he acted quickly.

Jason sent a mental order to the bulls in the courtyard. They were to cluster together and form a defensive circle. He then ordered his dark mages to curse the remaining cultists, identifying individual targets. He ordered his fire mages to create walls of fire behind the cultists, cutting off their retreat when the minotaurs turned away from them. Finally, he commanded the ice mages to create patches of ice in front of the horde of were-beasts to delay them for a moment. He just needed to buy his minotaurs a few seconds.

With his plan established, Jason surveyed the scene one last time. The were-beasts had inched forward a few feet already. With the time-slowing effect of his spell, Jason also couldn't detect any change in his minions' movements. He would have to hope that they received his commands while under the effects of the time compression.

Jason released the spell.

He promptly fell to one knee as a sharp headache drilled through his skull. He powered through the pain, grabbing a mana potion and chugging it quickly. Then his hands began to move as he watched his bulls shoulder their way through the cultists, forming a rough circle and placing their backs to one another.

The cultists used the opportunity to try to put some distance between themselves and the bulls; however, they found their movements slowed, and a wall of fire cut off their escape. In the meantime, the were-beasts hit the ice that appeared on the ground, losing their footing and sliding toward the circle of minotaurs. Jason's eyes finally rested upon his minions. They were tall monoliths standing amidst a sea of flailing enemies. Their sacrifice wouldn't be in vain.

Jason's hands moved as ancient words slipped from his lips. He had never tried casting *Corpse Explosion* on more than two or three targets at once. This time he needed to detonate the whole group. It was the only way.

Shadows wound around Jason's hands in a tumbling mass of energy. It wasn't enough. His mana plummeted as a torrent of shadows slithered up his arms. The swirling black maelstrom soon blocked out the world around him, obscuring his vision of the battlefield. He had to hope that his minotaurs would last. From a distance, the roof of the building he stood upon was now a coiling mass of black energy.

Then he ran out of mana.

He closed his eyes and *released*, whispering a silent prayer to the Dark One.

A rolling wave of shadows swept forward toward the courtyard, blocking out the light from the crystalline ceiling. The wave struck his minotaurs as they stood surrounded by the sea of were-beasts and cultists. A massive explosion rocked the ancient city. The resulting shockwave was strong enough that it knocked Jason over where he was crouched. His head was pounding, and his muscles ached as a ringing sound echoed in his ears. Yet he couldn't afford to wait. Jason frantically clawed at his bag, grabbing another mana potion. He yanked the cork and chugged the contents as he tried to push himself back to his feet with his free hand.

He hesitated as he saw what remained of the courtyard. A thick cloud of blood and dust now hung over the area. As the cloud began to dissipate, Jason saw that the square was now little more than a large crater. The explosions had completely disintegrated the were-beasts and cultists that had once stood in the yard.

"Wow," Jason murmured, impressed by the effects.

Yet he didn't have time to appreciate the destruction as bolts of multicolored energy flew past him. He looked to the northwest and saw a group of golden-robed figures running towards him down the street.

Shit, those must be the Masters.

Jason dove to his stomach in order to dodge the hail of magic projectiles that flew through the air, the desperate movement knocking the wind from his lungs. He could feel pain flare through his arm where a bolt grazed him, and he glanced anxiously at his health bar as he gasped for breath. Magic bolts whizzed overhead. Jason noted that each bolt was comprised of a swirling mixture of blue, red, yellow, and green energy.

He heard another roar, and the hail of missiles slowed. Jason took a chance and rose to a crouch. He saw that Riley and Frank had

finally entered the fight, attacking the Masters from the rear as they made their way down the street. Riley's archers had unleashed a wave of missiles upon the robed figures, and Jason could see that several had toppled to the ground where they now lay unmoving.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, he ordered his remaining mages forward to assist Riley and Frank. He spared a glance at the northeastern part of the city where he could make out the faint forms of the slaves fighting among the remaining cultists. The slaves wouldn't last long. Jason needed to finish the battle with the Masters quickly if they were going to have any chance of defeating the remainder of the regular troops.

He looked down at the wagon beside him and then back at the Masters in the street. His head still ached from his last use of *Custom Skeleton*, but he didn't have a choice. He needed reinforcements and didn't have time to cast *Specialized Zombie* on each corpse. He ordered Greg to drive the wagon forward into the battle that was brewing in the street. Meanwhile, Jason's fingers darted through the familiar gestures of *Custom Skeleton*, completing the spell as the wagon lumbered into position.

It was nearly fifty yards from the enemy spell casters in their golden robes. He counted at least twenty of the mages, their backs to Jason as they hurled bolts of energy at a building farther down the street. Multicolored missiles hung in the air and glittered like elemental fireflies under the time-slowing effect of Jason's spell.

Yet he didn't have time to appreciate the spectacular battle in the street or to get creative in summoning new minions. Instead, Jason opted to summon as many regular minotaur skeletons as he could while continuously chugging mana potions. The pile of bones heaved and exploded apart, the air soon filled with swirling bones. Then the bones began to knit themselves together as dark energy lashed through the air. A small army of skeleton bulls materialized in the street facing the casters.

His spell complete, Jason closed the skeleton creation menu. The world sped back up to what felt like blinding speed. Jason fell to his knees, his hands clutching his head in pain.

-200 Spellshock damage (Stunned)

This was the first time he had cast the spell in rapid succession, and the pain was so intense that he felt physically sick. Darkness crept at the edges of his vision. He wondered for a brief moment if he was going to pass out.

Gritting his teeth, Jason forced himself to watch the battle in the street. The skeleton-minotaurs thundered down the road toward the Masters, and they turned to meet this new threat. Frank capitalized on the distraction, darting from an alley behind the Masters. He was followed closely by a pair of minotaurs. Frank held a battle axe in each hand and released a bellow of rage as he charged the mages' unprotected rear, the sound of his voice swallowed by the cacophony of the battle. The small melee group struck the golden figures just behind a wave of dark missiles that were shot from the windows of a two-story building nearby.

Jason saw two Masters go down. However, a mage in the middle of the group laughed at the approaching enemies. He yelled over the battlefield in a voice that must have been magically enhanced, "You dare attack the Masters? Let us show you real power!"

The man released a blood-curdling cackle. The sound shifted, becoming deeper and changing to something warped and inhuman. The man's body contorted and his robe burst apart. His body morphed into a hulking humanoid beast. His hands lengthened into claws as large bony plates appeared on his skin. He looked like a cross between a bear and a dinosaur. The other Masters also began to shift and change, some growing animal claws and insect-like tails while others dropped to all fours and grew fanged teeth.

They're shapeshifters! Jason thought bleakly, still cradling his head. He couldn't provide much help at this point. It was up to Frank and Riley.

Frank wove among the Masters, his blades flashing in the multicolored light. The battle was pure chaos as the Masters transformed rapidly to suit their opponents. Frank swung at one feline creature, yet its arm morphed at the last minute, forming a shield of bone that blocked the attack with a screech of metal. Then the creature grew a scorpion tail that darted toward Frank, spearing his biceps. The warrior roared in pain and backpedaled quickly as his other axe sliced through the tail. A fountain of caustic green acid erupted from the wound, splattering the ground and causing wisps of smoke to drift into the air.

Jason saw several of his minions fall. Glancing at his party menu, he noticed that Frank was losing health rapidly. Riley must have realized the same thing because a glowing red arrow streaked from a nearby building and struck an unsuspecting shapeshifter behind Frank. The shapeshifter howled in pain and tried to reach behind him to grab the arrow. Thinking quickly, Jason ordered one of the nearby minotaurs to drop his axe and grab the Master. The beast lumbered over and grabbed each of the shapeshifter's arms, lifting him from the ground.

A blood mist began to twist and curl around the disabled Master, filling the street and applying its healing effect to Frank. Yet that wasn't all. Jason saw that the healing spell was affecting his skeleton and zombie minions as well. The dark energy in the blood knitted together their bones and decayed skin.

Despite the headache that still rebounded within his skull, a thought occurred to Jason. He sent a quick mental communication to one of the zombie archers he had left with Riley. The minotaur rotated the weakened Master to face the building where Riley was hiding. A moment later, two more glowing red arrows streaked from the building, striking the vulnerable shapeshifter in the chest.

Jason then ordered his light mage into action. He hadn't been able to use the minion much since he had summoned him back in the Twilight Throne. In the last few fights, Jason had just assigned him to heal Frank. Still, he had been reluctant to replace him. Although his command might have been slightly counter-intuitive to a living player or NPC, the light mage didn't hesitate to follow Jason's orders, switching his attention from Frank to the disabled Master. Flashes of light enveloped the Master, the light mage managing to keep him alive despite the damage-over-time effect applied by the arrows.

With three arrows embedded in the now-frantic Master, the blood mist thickened and expanded to fill the whole street. Its healing effect was amplified by the multiple arrows that were now buried in the shapeshifter.

The effect stacks! Jason thought with a gleeful grin.

He ordered the minotaur carrying the Master to back toward his skeletal brothers. The shapeshifter struggled fiercely, changing forms rapidly in an attempt to injure the undead creature and free himself. Yet the minotaur's strength proved too much and the healing effect of the mist prevented the Master from landing a mortal blow.

Jason's other minions moved to surround the minotaur carrying the shapeshifter, treating the skeleton as their standard bearer and staying well within the radius of the blood mist. Riley must have caught on to Jason's strategy because she added a few more arrows to the Master until he began to look like a human pincushion. The additional arrows didn't amplify the healing effects further. Jason figured that there must be a limit to the stacking effect.

Frank began to rampage among the Masters, charging into the thick of the enemy forces. His axes whirled in a rapid flurry of blows as he hacked off newly formed limbs. Surrounded by opponents, the Masters' blows rained down on Frank, tearing and ripping at his skin. Even with the amplified healing of the *Blood Mist*, Frank's health began to plummet once more. With a mighty roar, he activated the effect of his axes. His body gave off a glowing red aura that spread to

Jason's zombies and the archers hidden in the nearby building.

Frank extended his arms and spun in a vicious circle, creating a whirlwind of steel, blood, and death. His screams echoed over the field. Filled with bloodlust and rage, his axes cut deeply into his enemies, and blood drenched his clothing. Where the sometimes-caustic blood of his enemies touched his skin, it bubbled and tore open. Yet Frank didn't stop even as his health hit zero and then went negative.

Suddenly, Jason's minotaurs broke through to him. Frank maintained his aura as the minotaur carrying the prone Master came to stand beside him. Unable to move while channeling the damage aura, Frank raised his axes into the air and roared in triumph as the Masters were slowly pushed back. The remaining survivors broke and ran, their backs immediately peppered with arrows from the archers in the nearby buildings.

Finally, Jason stood watching Frank's bloodied and haggard form in the glowing light cast by the crystalline ceiling that hovered over the city. Riley exited the building to join him on the street, what was left of her archers in tow. The group's movements caused the blood mist to ripple and swirl around them. Meanwhile, Jason lifted himself to his feet, his dark-robed figure observing the battlefield from the rooftop.

Frank caught sight of Jason, and he roared again in triumph, saluting with one of his axes. Riley smiled and raised her bow as Jason's minions responded to the call. Their cries of victory echoed through the cavern and rebounded off the stone buildings.

"We definitely make a good team," Jason said to himself with a proud smile.

Chapter 21 - Discovered

Alexion stood in the center of the marketplace in Grey Keep, watching the flood of NPCs and players walk past him. A fountain stood nearby, jets of water shooting high into the air before they transformed into perfect spheres. The globes spiraled back down around the columns of water before landing at the base of the fountain. Alexion observed the flowing water and pondered absently what kind of spell would have been required to create the effect.

He knew he was trying to distract himself. Without the hollowness in the back of his mind, his heart raced as he contemplated what was about to happen. His role was clear. He was to remain in this spot until he was contacted by Caerus' men. This location had been carefully chosen to maximize the number of witnesses to his impending arrest.

An inconspicuous man approached Alexion, his body and face covered by a thin cloak. As he neared, the man said curtly, "It's time." He then walked off, blending back into the crowd almost seamlessly.

Alexion closed his eyes for a moment. Unfamiliar emotions roiled and swirled in his mind. Was this what fear felt like? Or was it guilt? He couldn't quite place a name to the emotion. Yet he knew he was about to mislead these people and possibly start a war just so that he could look good in the real world. When he considered it that way, it seemed so stupid and petty. Why was he even doing this?

"What else would I do?" he wondered absently. He could also imagine the voices of his mother and father, two relentless people who would stop at nothing to claim power for themselves. He knew what they would do, what a "real" Lane would do.

Still feeling conflicted, Alexion stepped up onto the stone lip that ringed the fountain. He turned to the crowd in the marketplace. "Good people of Grey Keep!" Alexion shouted above the din of the market.

Many eyes turned to watch the man dressed in a plain brown robe, his hair disheveled and a fine stubble covering his chin. "That's the prophet," one woman nearby murmured to her friend.

"I need your attention," Alexion continued. "The Lady spoke to me last night. She has granted me a prophecy of coming times." Alexion held aloft the golden book the Lady had given him.

With a flick of his wrist, Alexion opened the book. Multicolored lights shot from the pages and danced in the air above the market. He could hear a sharp intake of breath as many in the crowd gasped at the sight. He now had their full attention.

"The Lady has told me that the darkness at the heart of the Twilight

Throne is coming for this city. She has heard Jason's declaration of war." He paused, looking down at the book in his hands. "Yet while this danger lurks at our borders, the greater threat resides at home. The Lady tells me that this city's regent will be its downfall."

Alexion looked across the crowd, meeting eyes with many of the NPCs. A hushed silence had descended upon the group. "Grey Keep will fall to the Twilight Throne so long as Strouse rules…" Alexion said in a soft voice that carried through the still market. The crowd began murmuring among themselves, looking at one another with fearful expressions. Then several cries went up.

"Strouse must be removed!"

"He will doom us all!"

Alexion knew that these voices were carefully planted spies. Their prodding worked. Soon the entire throng in front of Alexion was a roiling mass of confusion as people began shouting for the removal of the city's regent.

Then Alexion caught the glint of sunlight reflecting off steel. A troop of soldiers had arrived, wearing the livery of the city's regent. They forcefully made their way through the crowd of NPCs, shoving people back to clear a path. The shouts of the NPCs faltered and grew quiet as a man at the head of the column approached Alexion. He wore plate armor that gleamed in the sun and a thick scar ran across his cheek.

He looked at the crowd around him. "My name is Sergeant Jeffries. I will be placing the traveler known as Alexion under arrest for treason against Grey Keep and inciting insurrection. Anyone who tries to defend the traveler will be arrested," he shouted at the crowd.

"Do I make myself clear?" Jeffries asked in a grim tone. His question was met with angry murmuring, but no one rose to defend Alexion. "Good," he continued.

Jeffries approached Alexion, his mouth twisting into a grimace. He spoke in a low voice, "Will you come with us peacefully, or will we have to take you by force?"

Alexion closed his eyes for a moment, steeling himself for the events that would come next. Even though he knew this was a game, it didn't change the nature of what he was about to do. Then he opened his eyes and forced a smile on his face.

"If this is the Lady's will, then so be it. I am nothing but her servant. I will submit to any punishment if it is in defense of this city," Alexion said in a loud voice, trying to exude a sense of calm he didn't quite feel.

* * *

It took another couple of hours to round up and destroy the remaining cultists and Masters. The golden-robed men and women were surprisingly resilient and resourceful. Their ability to shapeshift made it difficult to catch them. They were also formidable opponents since they could alter their bodies to cater to their foe's strengths and weaknesses.

Jason was forced to place a defensive force at the tunnel leading into the Minotaur King's throne room to stop any of the cultists from escaping. He then ordered his remaining minions to perform a systematic sweep of the city. Riley volunteered to lead the scouting parties, and Jason didn't try to argue with her. She seemed to have a personal vendetta to sort out.

As the rest of the cultists were being routed and destroyed, Jason and Frank made their way to the northwest end of the city. Several minotaur skeletons flanked them on either side as they walked. They planned to investigate the Masters' laboratory and determine whether there was anything worth looting. As they trudged down the dusty road, Jason inspected his notifications from the last battle.

x9 Level Up!
You have (145) undistributed stat points.

Corpse Explosion Alternate Effect Unlocked
At the cost of all your remaining mana, *Corpse Explosion* can be cast on all summoned zombies within sight of the caster. This is a spell of last resort since it will leave the caster weakened and defenseless. Exercise caution.

New Passive Skill: Spell Multi-Targeting
Repeatedly casting your spells on multiple opponents has given you insight into targeting multiple enemies. You may now cast multi-target spells more efficiently. Higher levels of this skill may enable you to increase the number of targets.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect 1: -1% mana cost when targeting multiple opponents. Max targets currently 4.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Leadership
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 4
Effect 1: Minions and subjects will receive a 7.5% increased learning speed for skills.

Effect 2: Increased reputation with NPC commanders and leaders.

x2 Spell Rank Up: Custom Skeleton
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: You may raise a custom skeleton using nearby bones. The skeleton's level is calculated as the caster's level + Willpower/70.
Effect 2: Mana cost reduced by 5%.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Corpse Explosion
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 4
Effect: Increased damage and radius (Currently 1.13 x Health).
Effect 2: 4% increased blast radius.
Alternate: Destroys all summoned zombies in the caster's line of sight at the cost of 100% of the caster's remaining mana. Leaves the caster weakened.

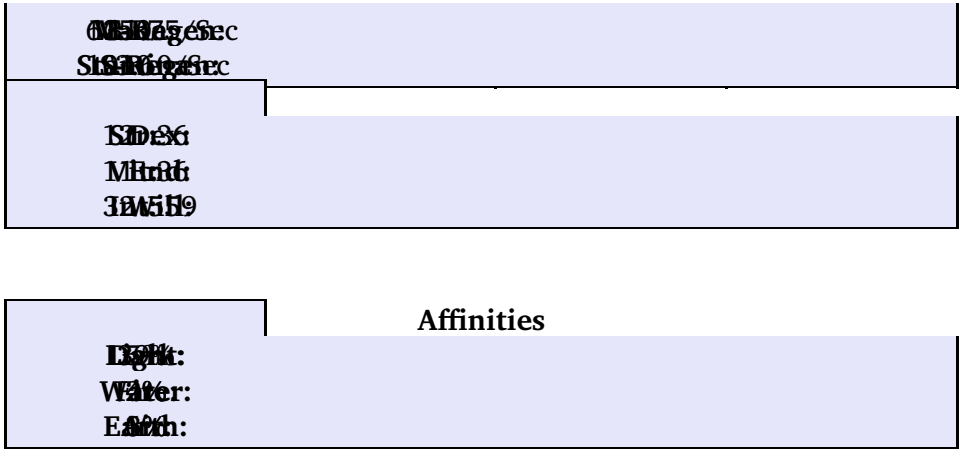
Interesting. I thought that spells could only be learned from trainers like Morgan. If I can discover alternate effects, then perhaps I could also discover spells on my own.

Jason was continually surprised by how much he didn't understand about the game. In many ways, it felt like he had been playing for months, yet it had only been a few weeks in the real world.

He also wasn't certain what he planned to do with his free stat points. They were starting to add up, and a part of him just wanted to dump them into *Willpower*. In these last few fights, more minions would have been helpful, especially if he continued to leave zombies with other people like he had done in Peccavi. However, he had no idea what would happen when he completed the quest that the Old Man had given him. He was reluctant to waste the points.

With a sigh, Jason pulled up his Character Status to review where he currently stood.

Character Status



Even with the experience penalty from playing with Frank and Riley, he had still progressed nicely. Apparently, killing a ruined city filled with cultists helped expedite the leveling process. Jason waved away his notifications as the pair finally reached the end of the northwestern road. It terminated in a compound of stone buildings surrounded by a high wall. A mangled wrought-iron gate hung loosely on its hinges, providing little resistance to the pair as they entered the complex.

Frank and Jason stopped short as they entered a small courtyard wedged between towering stone structures. Cages ringed the enclosure. Jason could hear a shuffling sound from the metal cages. As he looked closer, he could see that many were filled with wild animals, including many wolves. However, near the back, he discovered a row of cages filled with naked men and women. They slunk back against the bars in fear as they saw Frank and Jason.

"They're barely human anymore," Frank muttered.

Jason couldn't respond immediately. These former peasants had been mangled almost beyond recognition. Parts of their bodies had been detached and replaced with animal parts. One man was missing both of his arms, only sutured wounds remaining, and one leg had been replaced with what appeared to be a bear's leg. He moaned piteously, and his mad eyes stared at them as they walked past. Unfortunately, the other peasants weren't in much better condition.

"This is sick," Jason said in a low voice. He wasn't even certain his *Undead Devotion* spell could save their bodies. Even if it could, it likely wouldn't do anything for their minds. Many of the men and women in the cages appeared to have gone mad – almost certainly a byproduct of the torture and experimentation they had experienced at the cultists' hands.

"What do we do?" Frank asked, eyeing the peasants with a

mixture of pity and horror.

Jason hesitated. He knew there was only one solution available to him, but he was still reluctant. The humane thing to do was to put these people out of their misery. They couldn't be saved, either by magic or mundane means.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before sending the mental command to the skeletal minotaurs around them. The hulking skeletons approached each cage, smashing the locks with their axes. As the maddened and sick humans inside tried to crawl toward the newfound exits, the minotaurs' blades sliced through their necks with little resistance.

"You're just going to kill them?" Frank asked, aghast as he watched the massacre.

Jason opened his eyes, dark mana permeating his body and struggling to fight back the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. He met his friend's gaze evenly. "What would you have me do? Nothing can be done now. Their bodies are destroyed beyond redemption, and they've been driven mad by these… these experiments."

Frank looked between Jason and the swiftly decreasing number of slaves, his expression conflicted. "I guess I don't see a better way," he said quietly.

"There are others on the northeastern side that we can still save," Jason said. "Just remind yourself of that."

Alfred padded up beside Jason and watched the scene unfolding before them with dispassionate eyes. Jason glanced down at the cat, briefly meeting his gaze. The AI had created this disgusting scene, yet Jason could begin to understand the point he had made several days ago. As conflicted as he felt about putting the villagers out of their misery, it felt satisfying to cleanse this city of the "evil" cultists.

I suppose we all need something to fight against, he thought reluctantly.

As the minotaurs took care of the rest of the misshapen test subjects, Jason and Frank inspected the buildings that made up the compound. They swiftly discovered a horrifying parody of a laboratory set up in one of the larger buildings.

Bloodied instruments adorned one wall, while a stone table stood in the center of the room. Around the table, a rough pentagram had been chiseled into the stone floor. Within each of the five points of the star stood an iron pillar. Four of the columns held various ingredients, some of which Jason couldn't identify. However, the fifth column held an open book. The pages were yellowed with age and a substance that looked suspiciously like blood spotted the paper.

Frank walked up to the book slowly, grumbling under his breath, “It’s going to be some kind of death cult book of doom. It’ll probably melt my face off…” He stood in front of the book for a long moment. Then he sighed and reached out his hand. “But it’s still loot.”

Jason chuckled involuntarily from where he stood off to the side of the room, discreetly putting a minotaur skeleton between him and Frank. He didn’t really expect the book to do anything, but he was still going to prepare for the worst. Frank’s hand touched the book, but nothing happened. Then he grabbed the tome and flipped through the pages, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“I have no idea what this is supposed to be,” Frank said. “It’s all written in some strange language, and when I inspect it, it just says *unknown*.”

Jason shrugged. “We can always raise one of the Masters and get them to explain what it is or ask that cultist we imprisoned upstairs. In the meantime, let’s keep exploring the place. There might be something worth hauling off.”

After a few minutes of investigating the remaining rooms, the pair had found a ridiculous number of golden robes and a few decent staves and wands. Apparently, those were the sorts of items weird shapeshifting cultists toted around with them.

“This game’s loot is too realistic,” Frank complained as they made their way back into the courtyard. The minotaur skeletons had neatly stacked the corpses of the villagers against one wall while they investigated the buildings.

“I’d give anything for some decent magic armor,” Frank continued in a sullen voice. “Or some rings. Maybe an amulet with a strength enchantment.” Frank sighed wistfully, dreaming of loot.

Jason just looked at his friend skeptically. *Of course there isn’t any useful equipment here. These were a bunch of spellcasting cultists after all.*

“Hey, guys!” A shout came from behind them.

Jason turned and caught sight of Riley entering the courtyard. She was flanked by minotaur skeletons, an ominous red mist curling and coiling around the group. In the center of the throng stood the skeleton bull that had captured a Master during the battle. The man was bound to the skeleton’s bleached-white body. Arrows protruded from his hands and feet, and his mouth was gagged. The light mage beside him continuously cast *Light Heal* on the Master, the intermittent flashes of light keeping him alive.

“Hi, Riley,” Jason greeted. “I take it the rest of the city is clear?”

Riley nodded. “Yes, I’ve also ordered several of the minotaurs to pile the corpses of the captured villagers. None of them made it,”

she said in a dark voice.

Then her eyes focused on the pile of mangled corpses lying against the wall of the courtyard. Her expression darkened, and her mana flared. Tattoos of energy crawled up her arms. “What happened here?” she asked in a low voice.

“The Masters. These were the current test subjects,” Frank said shortly, coming up beside the two of them. “Jason put the poor bastards out of their misery.”

“This is disgusting,” Riley murmured, her hand cradling the hilt of the dagger at her hip. Her gaze shifted to the man strapped to the totem, and he flinched under her gaze.

Frank snorted. “The worst news is that there isn’t much to salvage here. All we found was this book,” he said, brandishing the dark tome.

The Master strapped to the minotaur skeleton made a loud grunt, straining against the ropes that kept him bound. “Huh,” Jason said. “Looks like that book is something special. Why don’t we hear what the Master has to tell us.”

With a wave of his hand, a zombie approached the bound man, ripping the gag from his mouth. The Master gasped for air for a moment, before croaking at Jason, “I won’t answer your questions. I will be free eventually, and I will gut you like one of the slaves.”

Before Jason could react, Riley stepped forward, punching the man in the stomach. The Master responded immediately, dark scales crawling up his abdomen before the blow could land. Her fist landed with a dull thud. The man smirked at Riley. “You think you can hurt me, girl?”

Riley’s lips curled into a cruel grin. “Why don’t you look down.” The man glanced to his waist, where Riley’s blade was pressed against his groin.

“You can shift your limbs, but I’m curious whether you can regrow extremities. Why don’t we find out?” Riley asked in a steady voice. Her dark eyes flashed with poorly concealed anger.

The Master gulped, his mouth working as he tried to find his voice. “You wouldn’t,” he finally gasped.

Riley didn’t hesitate. Her other hand flashed forward, a dagger materializing out of thin air and ripping a jagged tear in the man’s stomach, which had slowly shifted back to regular flesh. The Master screamed in pain as blood poured from the wound and he looked down at his stomach in horror. Then another flash of light struck the man, and the wound began to close.

“Go ahead. Test me,” Riley said in a growl. “Next time, you lose your manhood. Now answer our questions. What. Is. The. Book?”

The Master looked at her, a trace of fear in his eyes. Then he

glanced at the black book in Frank's hand. "That's a skill book. It teaches the transformation ability used by the Masters." His mouth morphed into a mocking grin. "But you heathens won't be able to use it. Only the Masters can – those that stand in parity among the four elemental affinities."

Frank looked at the book with a thoughtful expression, his hand rubbing at his chin. Then he placed the tome in his satchel. Jason noted his friend's odd look and that he had pocketed the book. They would need to discuss the matter later.

Jason glanced at Riley with a worried expression. Her behavior was a bit out of character, but now wasn't the time to bring it up. For now, her anger was an asset. He turned back to the Master, raising an eyebrow. "What did you hope to accomplish here? Why were you experimenting on these people?"

The Master didn't respond immediately, his eyes taking on a look of manic excitement and staring feverishly at Jason. "We are going to do something that no mortal has ever accomplished. We are working to summon a god! A seventh affinity." He gave a harsh laugh of triumph.

"We are so close – so close," he babbled. "It's below us now. Feeding. Growing stronger."

Frank looked at the Master in shock. "What the hell could you hope to gain by creating a god?"

The man's fever-filled eyes spun to focus on Frank's form. "Immortality and power, of course. When we give life to a god, he will reward his creators, won't he? You will see. He will look kindly upon those that introduced him to the world."

Riley snorted indelicately. "More likely it would kill the lot of you, if you even managed to succeed," she snarled. "I would actually relish the opportunity to see that."

Jason pondered the Master's words. There must be some sort of boss creature below them. He needed that thing's heart for the Old Man's quest. Yet he could only imagine what it might look like or how strong it might be. He also hadn't seen any obvious entrance to the boss room so far. Was it hidden?

"We want to see this god that you've created," Jason said. "Can you show us where it is?"

The Master's bloody lips split into a mad grin. "Oh yes. You would feed the creature quite nicely. I will show you."

Frank and Riley glanced at Jason with worried eyes.

"Are you seriously going to try to kill the beast?" Frank asked.

Jason smiled as he looked at the Master. "Of course not. You heard the man," Jason replied. He turned to look at his friends. "We're going to kill a god."

Chapter 22 - Futile

Alexion sat in a prison cell, his back resting against the rough stone wall behind him. Sunlight trickled through an iron grating embedded into the thick walls of the keep, faintly illuminating the enclosed space. Alexion knew that, later that day, he would be publicly tried for inciting insurrection and sentenced to death. Everything was going according to Caerus' plan.

He wasn't scared to die in-game. It had happened a few times before. While the experience was far from pleasant, he knew that it wasn't lasting. His real body wouldn't suffer any harm, and his character would respawn in less than an hour. Even the NPCs knew that his death wasn't permanent. Yet that wasn't the point of the performance that would be put on in a few hours. This execution was symbolic. It demonstrated that Strouse could kill anyone, NPCs and travelers alike, with a simple command.

Alexion's thoughts were interrupted as he heard a guard speaking outside his cell. "Hey, Randy," a gruff voice said. "They have you on the night shift again?"

Alexion couldn't see the pair, but he heard the other man sigh before replying, "Story of my life, John. I have to guard this blond-haired twit they arrested in the market today. Can you believe this 'prophet' was preaching insurrection in the middle of the city?"

John snorted. "A prophet, huh? I wonder if he's just hearing voices. They should throw him in the drunk tank. There are plenty of people in there that think they can talk to gods. He could make some friends!"

Randy chuckled darkly. "Well, he'd have to be crazy to go against Strouse. His head is going to roll for it tomorrow," Randy replied in a dire tone.

As Alexion listened to the conversation, he could feel his blood boil. He wanted to dash to the bars and scream at the guards, but he managed to restrain himself. The point of this sham was to act the part of a prophet. A man who spoke the word of a supposedly compassionate god couldn't scream at his guardsmen or start casting spells from behind the bars.

As Alexion sat there fuming, a small dark form padded softly down the hall outside his cell. He barely caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, the figure's sinuous black body melding into the shadows cast by the torches lining the interior hallway of the dungeon. As Alexion watched the form, its feline eyes met Alexion's.

His vision blurred and the stone prison cell melted away. Alex was sitting in a hallway, his back now pressed against textured wainscoting that

ran the length of the hall. His eyes were closed, but his small knuckles were white as he clenched his fists. He could hear his father's voice booming from the room down the hall.

"I don't know what to do with the boy," George said in a frustrated tone. "There's just something wrong with him. At least when he wept over his mother, I could understand his grief. He doesn't cry anymore, but he doesn't smile either. He just seems… dead inside."

George hesitated before adding more softly, "I hope it isn't the same problem that plagued his mother."

A brief silence hung in the air as the person on the other end of the phone replied to Alex's father. Then George sighed. "Honestly, the cancer might have been a blessing in disguise. I know I shouldn't say that, but when you spoke with her, you never knew who would answer back."

Another short silence.

"The doctors weren't certain," George replied to the unvoiced question. "I had her see every psychiatrist in town and a few clinics abroad. Schizophrenia, most likely. If it weren't for the prenup and Alex, I would have left years ago."

Alex couldn't take any more. Something was wrong with his mother? With him? His father was happy his mother had died? His infantile mind tried vainly to process this information. Even with the numbing hollowness, his thoughts twisted and spun in chaos – the bottomless despair looming in the background and just waiting for him to relax his grip on the hollow feeling.

A shadowy feminine voice whispered in his ear, luring him in with words of hope. She assured him that he would be okay – that everything would be okay. Her son was a Lane, after all.

* * *

The group stood in front of a rather ordinary-looking door nestled against the rough rock wall of the cavern on the north side of the ruined city. The surface appeared to be made of wood, but a closer inspection revealed that it had been carved into the cave wall. Beside the door sat four pillars, the symbols for the four elements etched into their sides.

"This isn't exactly intimidating," Frank said in a bored tone. "Is this god supposed to be behind this tiny door?"

Jason shrugged, turning to the bound Master. "How do we open it?" he asked gruffly.

The Master glared at him disdainfully. "You need to conquer the four elements to open this door. It is beyond your feeble abilities."

Riley's fist promptly slammed into the man's jaw. The Master grunted in pain, spitting out fresh blood. "I didn't quite hear you there. How are we supposed to open the door again?" she asked sweetly, as her dark eyes challenged him to speak back to her again.

The Master glared at her but sullenly replied, "You need to expose the pillars to the four elements."

"Good boy," Riley said and turned back to the columns. She approached them, inspecting the symbols. She blew on the air pillar and then grabbed a handful of dirt from the ground, pouring it on the earth pillar. She then spat on the water pillar before glancing back at Jason with a raised eyebrow.

He met Riley's eyes for a long moment. They were a dark obsidian. Honestly, he couldn't recall the last time she had released her dark mana. He understood the temptation to give into the darkness, using it to vent her emotional baggage. He could only surmise that her recent aggressive behavior had something to do with her experience with Alex. Not certain what he could say to her to help, he decided to leave it be a while longer. He could certainly sympathize with her need to blow off some steam.

With a mental shrug and a wave of Jason's hand, a fireball shot through the air, striking the remaining stone column. A wave of heat washed over Jason. As the flames faded, he could see that the now-singed column was still standing. One of his fire mages stood behind him, remnants of flame curling around his decaying, pale hand. Without ceremony, the stone door creaked open, revealing a dark passage beyond.

"Our god will kill you," the Master croaked harshly. "You're no match for what lies beneath us."

"Gag him," Jason said simply. One of his zombies promptly shoved a cloth rag into the man's mouth. The Master glared at Jason defiantly, and Jason smirked in response. If they had made it this far, they could take on whatever boss creature these cultists had cooked up.

"Let's do this!" Frank declared, rubbing his hands together. As his eyes filled with excitement, he surveyed the dark tunnel that lay on the other side of the open stone portal. He walked through the doorway and proceeded down the narrow passage.

Jason watched his large friend as the group walked down the dark tunnel. First Riley and now Frank. He had noticed substantial changes in them. He couldn't really decide whether it was a bad thing. They were both much more comfortable acting on their impulses and desires. Since Frank's fight with the Minotaur King, he had quickly begun to lose his surly reservation. Riley had also begun to act more confident, and she now readily took charge of situations without

hesitation. It was like a switch had been flipped in their heads.

Maybe it's for the best.

Jason glanced down at Alfred, who padded softly beside him. He knew that his friends' changed behavior was likely caused by the AI. Yet, at the same time, he knew that Alfred had only manufactured the situation, bringing the group together within the game and creating the obstacles they had faced. What they chose to do after that was up to them. An archaic expression flitted through Jason's mind, something one of his parents' clients had said to him many years ago; *you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink*. It seemed fitting now. Alfred might have given them the opportunity, but Frank and Riley had decided to change on their own.

His thoughts were interrupted as the tunnel abruptly ended, opening onto a ledge overlooking a large cavern. In contrast to the uniform stonework of the ruined city, the cave walls were rough and ill-formed. The room was also lit by giant multicolored crystals embedded in the ceiling. Jason noted that the crystals hung from the stone roof like stalactites, reaching down into the room in jagged points. The slowly shifting light from the crystals illuminated a waterfall near the back wall of the cave. Water crashed into a small lake that filled nearly half the cavern, echoing throughout the room. Jason glanced to his right and saw a narrow trail leading down to the cave floor below.

"I don't see anything down there," Riley observed quietly.

Jason agreed that there wasn't any sign of the beast that the Master had described. Then his eyes darted to the lake. There was only one place it could be hiding.

"It's probably in the lake," Jason replied softly. "Give me a second to get my troops together." He looked back at his minions and pulled up his Summon Information.

Summon Information

Control Limit	68
Zombie Level Cap	100
Current Skeletons	13
Current	1

Type of Summon

Minions	20
Melee (Skel	1
Fire Mage	3
Light Mage	2

He had twenty minotaurs, almost ten mages, and seven archers. There were also many corpses left in the city, the remains of the Masters and cultists. He expected he could salvage some bones from the men and were-beasts he had destroyed in the courtyard. Additionally, there were a sizable number of minotaur bones left in the maze that he hadn't been able to squeeze into the wagon during the encounter with the cultists.

Jason had decided to leave the bodies of the enslaved villagers for now. He could raise them with *Undead Devotion*, but then he would be forced to manage low-level NPCs or ensure their safe travel back to the village. Besides, he might need to use their corpses. If it came to that, then he would need to explain to William that they had all perished in the Masters' experiments.

If he lost this next battle, Jason would lose quite a bit, but at least he wouldn't be left without minions. That took some of the pressure off. He glanced at the real-world time and saw that they had a few hours before they would need to log out for the night. They might be able to complete the dungeon this evening.

"Okay," Jason whispered, turning back to Frank and Riley. "Let's do this. Melee will go down first; our ranged troops should position themselves near the back wall. The casters will stay up here near me. Assume that once we enter the cave, the creature will crawl out of the lake."

Frank motioned at the Master bound to one of the minotaurs. "What about that guy?"

Jason looked at the bound man, and his lips curled into a grim smile. "He's going down with the melee troops. He's our healing totem, after all." The Master's eyes widened, and he moaned against the gag in his mouth.

Frank chuckled darkly and moved down the narrow trail, the minotaurs and captured Master following closely behind him. Riley and the other archers moved to the back wall of the cave near the base of the trail while Jason and his mages fanned out along the now-empty ledge.

As the melee troops moved into the center of the floor, Jason held his breath, and his pulse raced in anticipation. He wasn't certain what to expect from a fledgling god. Fortunately, he didn't have to wait long to find out.

The water of the lake shuddered, waves rolling across the surface in an undulating circle. Jason could feel small tremors in the cave floor, shifting the dust that had settled on the rock surface. As he watched the lake, a hulking creature slowly rose from the murky depths. Everyone in the room froze as the creature lumbered out of the water.

"Holy shit," Jason muttered.

The Masters' god had a giant reptilian body and scales the size of Jason's hand covering its thick hide. Its huge stubby legs pounded the stone and mud of the lake bed, as it slowly made its way out of the lake. Yet it was the creature's head that drew Jason's attention – or 'heads' was really more accurate.

The creature had four serpentine heads attached to its torso by long sinuous necks that towered in the air. Each head was colored differently, and it quickly became apparent that the colors corresponded to an elemental affinity. Energy curled and crackled along each of the heads: coiling flames, gusts of air, and shards of ice and stone swirling around the creature's long necks as they lashed the air.

It must be some kind of Hydra, Jason thought. He quickly inspected the creature, revealing that it was level 203. A small skull was listed next to the creature's name. He wasn't certain what the symbol meant, but it couldn't be anything good.

Jason had played plenty of video games, and he knew some Greek mythology. However, he suspected that this creature couldn't regrow its heads. Based on the battle in the city above and the captured Master's explanation regarding the book Frank had found, Jason assumed that the cultists somehow harnessed the four elemental affinities to alter their own bodies. If that was the case, then the Masters had probably created a pale imitation of an in-game god with this Hydra, likely creating the creature's body and then imbuing it with elemental energy.

I hope I'm right, he thought as he watched the creature's heads whip through the air. The creature's movements abruptly stilled, and the heads hovered in the air, their eyes focusing on the group as their serpentine tongues slithered from their mouths.

Frank shook himself out of his stupor and initiated the attack. His form darted toward the hulking beast, a roar emerging from his throat that echoed through the cavern. Jason ordered the minotaur skeletons forward quickly, trying to cover for his friend's reckless charge. He also ordered his mages into action, bolts of fire and ice rocketing through the air.

The Hydra's green head observed Frank with an almost bored expression. Then it opened its mouth and emerald energy pulsed along its forked tongue. With a crashing sound, stalagmites erupted from the floor around Frank, abruptly halting his charge. The stone lances penetrated his skin, severing both flesh and muscle. His roar swiftly turned to a howl of pain.

Jason just stared for a long moment. Was each head capable of casting a different elemental magic? His mages' bolts of energy

splashed across the heads, causing little damage. Perhaps it was immune to elemental magic?

More mundane missiles trailed the bolts of energy as Riley entered the fray. Some of the projectiles pierced the creature's scales, finding purchase in the ridges between the plates. The beast's heads roared in pain. However, Jason noted that most of the arrows had simply bounced off the Hydra's scales and ricocheted into the rock walls of the cavern.

So, possibly immune or resistant to magic and its armor is difficult to penetrate with arrows, Jason thought as he tried to maintain a clear head. His dark mana rebounded through his skull, the only thing preventing him from panicking as he began to realize how difficult this fight would be.

Shaking his head, Jason ordered the minotaur carrying the Master close to Frank and the other skeletons closed ranks. Two of the skeletal bulls rushed at the Hydra. Jason just needed to buy Frank a few seconds to free himself and heal. Unfortunately, he couldn't use *Corpse Explosion* on his skeleton minions, but hopefully the minotaurs would still provide a distraction.

The bleached-white creatures approached the Hydra at a reckless charge, their bladed axes biting deeply into the beast's legs. Green blood welled from the wounds. Where it splashed the skeletal bulls, the substance melted through bone at an alarming rate. Jason swiftly ordered his minotaurs back. He wasn't fast enough.

The Hydra responded immediately, the yellow head opening its mouth. Electricity crackled around its tongue and then lashed forward. The lightning bolt struck one of the minotaurs and arced to the other, swiftly cracking and charring their bones. A deafening crash echoed through the cavern from the air displaced by the bolt of electricity. Then two singed piles of bone collapsed to the floor.

It took out both minotaurs in one strike! Its blood is also some kind of acid. How are we supposed to kill this thing? Jason thought, his growing anxiety beginning to overwhelm the effects of the cool energy that filled his veins.

A pulsing ball of black energy streaked through the air and struck the open mouth of the yellow head before exploding violently. The attack severed the Hydra's tongue, and its other heads let out a howl of pain. Jason's eyes darted to Riley where she stood at the back of the cave. She had responded quickly, taking advantage of the creature's moment of weakness.

Finally free, Frank reentered the fray, his large form darting toward the Hydra. He leaped forward, landing on its back. His axes swung with wild abandon, hacking into the base of the green head. Emerald blood splashed Frank's form, melting his clothing and causing

his skin to bubble and peel. Frank screamed as he continued to strike the creature, his roar a mixture of pain and rage.

Jason ordered the minotaurs forward again. This was their chance to cripple the monster. The skeletal creatures charged at the Hydra, their hooved feet pounding the stone floor. Their axes soon ripped into its legs and torso. The Hydra thrashed and howled in pain as its blood sprayed the floor of the cave. Then it fought back.

The green head opened its mouth, facing away from Riley's archer group. Slabs of stone erupted from the floor around it and then slammed into the creature's body. The rock swiftly melted together, forming an armor that coated the creature's already-thick scales. The blades of the minotaurs' axes couldn't find purchase against the stone, their blows throwing off sparks. At the same time, the blue mouth opened and pointed straight at the ceiling. A giant ball of ice began to form in the Hydra's open mouth, pulsing and writhing as it grew.

"What is…?" Jason didn't get to finish his sentence.

The ball of ice exploded in a cascade of energy. A torrential wave of jagged shards shot downward, slamming into the floor of the cave and spreading outward in an expanding ring. The force of the spell threw Frank across the cavern, his body smashing into the rock wall of the cave. He didn't get back up. A quick glance at Jason's party menu showed that Frank's status window had grayed out. The wave of ice destroyed several of the minotaurs and trapped the others, effectively immobilizing them in blocks of ice.

The creature eyed the remaining skeletons, and then its reptilian eyes shifted to Jason on the ledge and Riley's archers along the back wall. The red head opened its mouth, flames erupting from its open maw in a torrent. The flamethrower washed over the archers along the back wall, not giving them sufficient time to run or dodge. Riley tried to roll out of the way, but even she was too slow. The flames struck her, the force of the blast throwing her against the wall and incinerating her clothes, skin, and bones. Riley's status window grayed out.

Jason stood in mute amazement. He didn't know what to do. Both Frank and Riley were gone. He looked back to the Hydra and saw multiple heads pointing at him, energy collecting in the creature's open mouths. His death loomed before him.

"Run," Jason screamed to his mages, throwing himself forward and putting the cave wall behind him.

The undead responded immediately, rushing back down the tunnel just as multiple beams of energy washed over Jason. It felt as though the wind was knocked out of him and overwhelming pain rolled across his body, the game's barely muted interpretation of what it felt like to be torn apart, melted, and frozen simultaneously. After

what felt like an eternity, the world finally went black, and a screen appeared in Jason's vision:

System Message

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

"Damn it," Jason gasped, his voice swallowed up by the dark void that enveloped him. Then the world popped back into existence. His mind was still reeling from his recent death, and he stumbled from the abrupt change in scenery, falling to his knees on the ledge. He gasped for air as he tried to process what had happened. After a few moments, his churning thoughts began to settle, and he looked around him.

He was kneeling on the ledge overlooking the Hydra's den. The game world had taken on an otherworldly cast, the colors washed out and wisps of blue energy trailing through the air. He looked to the side and saw himself, his black cloak obscuring his face and armor. Then his eyes shifted to the lake. He saw the creature begin to lumber out of the water and the battle commenced again. And again. And again.

Jason watched his friends die over and over, unable to help them. He now understood what Frank had meant when he described his earlier death. Anger, frustration, and guilt warred in Jason's mind. He hadn't been strong enough to protect his friends or smart enough to call for a retreat when he realized what they were up against.

He pulled up the system menu and tried to log off. He just couldn't take watching the scene replay on an endless loop. He discovered the logout button had been grayed out. When he pressed it anyway, he was confronted with a notification informing him that the option to log out had been suspended. If he logged out before he respawned, he wouldn't be able to log back into AO for three real-world hours. He assumed this was a way to compensate for the faster respawn rate in the dungeons and to encourage players to learn from their mistakes.

He couldn't afford to delay his respawn, so he endured the scene again and again. He watched Frank's battered body get tossed across the cave. He watched Riley get incinerated by the beast's flamethrower. Guilt welled in his chest as he kept watching. This was

his fault. He could have just sent in one skeleton as a test while the group stayed safely in the tunnel. He could have prepared an escape plan.

He had been arrogant.

A rumbling voice spoke from beside Jason, startling him. “Finally, you’ve realized your mistake,” the Old Man said in irritation. He approached Jason slowly. “You think because you have won previous battles, that you are somehow invincible?”

Jason didn’t know how to respond. The Old Man’s words echoed the guilty thoughts that flitted through his mind. “I told you before that a leader must learn to lean on others,” the Old Man continued. “By the same token, the people that follow you are important. You should not toss away their lives lightly.”

He motioned to Frank’s and Riley’s prone bodies. “Do you think that this world comes with no costs? What will happen when you make this mistake with those that do not come back? What if these were the bodies of Rex or Jerry?”

“I messed up,” Jason admitted softly. “I understand that.”

“Do you?” the Old Man hissed. Jason had never seen him this upset. “You walk my path, boy. That comes with a great responsibility. You see those around you as merely moving pieces on a chessboard of your own desire. Cardboard caricatures of people cut out to serve a specific role in your design. Even with your fellow travelers, you do not treat them with the respect they deserve.”

The Old Man hesitated, his eyes turning to the scene of his friends’ deaths which had begun to replay again. “What do you know of the people that follow you? What of your so-called Shadow Council? Do you know their histories? Their goals and dreams? Those are people that lead your city!” He gestured to Frank’s and Riley’s bodies. “Do you understand why this pair follows you? What drives them? You call these people friends, but you know nothing about them.”

Jason could feel his anger rising at the Old Man’s words. “You told me before to follow my own desires. Now, what are you saying? That I shouldn’t?”

The Old Man stooped in front of Jason where he knelt on the ground, his cowled face hovering in his vision. “Sometimes I forget you are merely a child. Learning to embrace your desire is only the first step along my path. Those that wish to see the full extent of the power that I have to offer must go further. You must learn to identify the desires of others and foster those wants and needs. This is the true mastery of desire.”

He stood back up. “To do this, you must try to understand those that follow you.”

Jason stared at the Old Man in shock. He hadn't considered that there was anything deeper to the power the Old Man offered than the pursuit of his own agenda. As the full realization of what the god was saying weighed on him, Jason muttered, "Maybe I don't want this."

The Old Man chuckled, his tone softening. "No good ruler wants to assume the obligations of leadership. I never claimed that this would be easy. If you must turn to self-interest for motivation, ask yourself what you stand to lose if you don't continue to move forward. I believe the same message is often reiterated in those books you've grown so fond of. If you will not trust the word of a god, then perhaps you will believe your dead scholars."

With a final grunt of irritation, the Old Man disappeared in a cloud of dark mana. Wisps of ebony energy floated through the air, faintly outlining his robed form before dissipating.

Jason considered the Old Man's words, closing his eyes. Maybe he was right. Jason had been focused solely on himself and his city. He looked at his friends and the other NPCs as tools to accomplish his own goals. That was part of why he had kept his true plans from Frank and Riley. He had overlooked the growing changes he had seen in his friends, not bothering to dig any deeper, because they didn't seem relevant to his goals.

Jason shook his head, rising slowly to his feet. He would try to learn from this, but there was nothing he could do about his relationship with Riley and Frank right now. Like the Old Man said, he had plenty to lose if he didn't keep moving forward, both in-game and in the real world. He needed to focus on one problem at a time. Right now, he needed to defeat the Hydra and take its heart. He should be using this time to figure out how to defeat the creature, not sitting here and wringing his hands. After they made it past this battle, he could figure out how to act on the Old Man's advice.

The problem was that it seemed impossible. The creature could cast up to four spells simultaneously, both defensively and offensively. Its natural armor was incredibly resilient, and any damage caused to the Hydra released a spray of caustic blood. It was also able to cast devastating area-of-effect attacks, destroying or immobilizing waves of Jason's minions at once. On top of all that, Jason had lost his remaining minotaurs and all his archers. His mages had just barely escaped the blast that had destroyed him.

"How are we going to do this?" he muttered. Jason knew that almost every conflict he had encountered so far in the game had a solution. It usually just involved using unconventional tactics. In contrast, their group had simply charged the beast head-on with no solid plan. He needed a strategy.

Jason's eyes drifted around the cavern. Was there something he

could use to get an edge on the Hydra? The lake didn't help him and likely represented a death trap with the beast's air magic. The ledge Jason stood upon gave him some high ground, but also made him an easy target. There was little ground cover on the floor of the cave, with few boulders or other obstacles to hide behind. As Jason surveyed the cave, multicolored light played across the floor. Then he paused and his brow furrowed.

He looked up at the crystals that hung from the ceiling. Sharp, jagged shards pointed down at the Hydra's enormous body. Given the creature's size, multiple stalactites hung directly over the serpent. Then Jason surveyed the ledge where he stood. A glimmer of an idea was starting to form in his mind. Maybe he couldn't beat the creature in a head-on fight, but perhaps he could do what he did best; he could sucker punch it.

Jason's lips pressed into a grim line as he looked at the Hydra. "You've won this round," he murmured. "But we'll be back."

Chapter 23 - Shrewd

Alexion's head was covered in a thick woolen bag, only faint sunlight showing through the cloth as he trudged forward. The guards roughly guided him, making certain to offer the occasional kick or shove as encouragement. Regardless, he was grateful for the bag. His mind was still reeling from the memory he had relived a few hours earlier, and he could use a few more minutes to compose himself before he had to put on his next performance.

Alexion suddenly stumbled, his foot catching on a rock in the road. He was rewarded with a sharp kick. "Keep moving," one of the guards rasped from behind him.

Cursing under his breath, Alexion kept shambling forward as his mind fixated on the forgotten memory of his father's conversation. This wasn't the first memory that he had recalled in the last few days. Why hadn't he remembered these events before? Although he was reluctant to admit it, a part of him knew that the answer was simple – he had repressed them. They were immensely painful, his mother's sickness, her death, and her probable mental illness.

What he didn't understand was why they were resurfacing now. Was it the game doing something to him? Was it that damned cat that kept showing up? Was it the Lady of Light? Or perhaps the most difficult question to face: was there simply something wrong with him?

His foot struck the edge of a stair. Hard. Alexion drew in a sharp breath as a dull pain radiated up from his foot. He could hear the guard behind him laughing, his chuckle accompanied by several other men nearby. As he moved forward, he could also make out the murmur of a nearby crowd. They were close.

"Up the stairs, prophet," the guard growled. Alexion stumbled up the steps, carefully trying to feel out the edges of the staircase with his feet.

Once he made it to the top of the steps, he was shoved forcefully. Alexion toppled forward, landing heavily on his knees. The bag was ripped from his head, and blinding sunlight shone in his eyes. He blinked rapidly, trying to make out the area around him. As his vision adjusted, he saw that he was kneeling on a wooden platform set up in the market square. A crowd of people stood before him, their eyes all focused on Alexion's prone form.

"Hello again, Alexion," a strong voice sounded from behind him. Alexion turned and found himself looking upon Strouse's chiseled features. "I see you didn't take my warning to heart."

The man leaned in close, a cruel glint in his eyes. "You should have

kept your head down and your mouth shut."

* * *

"Damn it," a voice called out. Jason could hear a fist strike the stone floor with a dull thump.

He opened his eyes and found himself lying on the ground of the Minotaur King's throne room. Riley and Frank sat beside him. Frank was glaring a hole in the floor, and he rubbed his bruised fist idly. Riley looked similarly shaken. Like Jason, she hadn't experienced a death in-game until now. She glanced around the room with a panicked and confused expression. Jason noted that her eyes had reverted to their natural color, her death forcing her to release her dark mana. He could only imagine the rush of emotions she was feeling as the anesthetic effect of her mana abandoned her.

Riley glanced at Jason briefly before her eyes dropped to her hands. "That fight seems impossible," she said softly, her voice quavering slightly.

"No kidding!" Frank retorted angrily. "That stupid snake creature can cast four spells simultaneously, is built like a tank, and can wipe out half our group with one attack. Maybe if we had forty players and a full support team…"

Jason pushed himself from the ground and wiped off the dust that had settled on his cloak. He then looked back at Frank and Riley, addressing them in a serious voice. "I admit it was a setback."

"I'm not certain 'setback' is the right word," Riley replied. "We barely injured the creature on our first attempt and it… it destroyed us."

"I second that!" Frank added, also rising to his feet with a grunt.

Jason walked over to Riley, offering her a hand. She eyed it skeptically for a moment before accepting his help. She still looked disoriented from her recent death. Her hand lingered on his for a moment, and he could feel her fingers curl around his slightly.

"You alright?" Jason asked Riley quietly. He received a short nod, and she released his hand. He gave her a worried look as she turned to collect her bow from the floor.

Jason watched his two friends, considering carefully how he should broach a discussion of the fight. "That first loss is on me. I screwed up. We shouldn't have rushed in so recklessly since we didn't know what we were facing. One good thing did come out of it, though; I think I might have figured out a way to defeat the creature."

Riley adjusted her armor and took a deep, steadying breath. She raised an eyebrow at Jason in question. “What are you suggesting?”

“We can use the terrain to injure the Hydra. Specifically, I need the two of you and my minions to distract it while I bring down the roof on the thing’s head.”

Frank snorted dismissively. “I remember seeing those crystals hanging from the ceiling, but how are you going to knock them down? They were nearly five feet across in some places.”

Jason put a hand to his chest. “Trust me. I have a few tricks up my sleeve. I need to go gather the remaining corpses we’ve left scattered around the dungeon and re-summon my minions.”

“While you do that, I think I’m going to take a short break,” Riley said, her eyes still clouded. “I’ll be back in about an hour.” With that, Riley pulled up her system menu and disappeared with a popping sound and a flash of multicolored light. Jason’s eyes lingered on the spot where she had stood a moment ago.

It’s just going to take her some time to adjust to the dark mana and process the last few hours, he thought. *Maybe some downtime to herself will help*.

Jason looked over at Frank and saw that he was also about to pull up his menu to log out. He put a hand on his large friend’s arm. “Before you go, tell me about that tome you took from the Masters.”

His large friend looked at him with an embarrassed expression. Then he pulled the dark, bloodstained book from his bag. “After the Master explained what this thing did, the information window updated. It’s apparently a skill book.”

“That teaches what?” Jason asked, intrigued.

Frank hesitated, his eyes fixed on the book. Then he replied, “It teaches a new class. It’s called a Thaumaturge. Judging from the Master’s explanation, it probably involves shapeshifting. To use the book, you need to have a balance of the elemental affinities.”

Jason’s eyes widened. “Okay, so why do you look so conflicted? Can you use it?”

“Yes,” Frank said in a quiet voice. “I just don’t know if I should.”

“Why not?” Jason asked bluntly. He didn’t understand his friend’s reluctance.

“I just… those guys were messed up in the head, man. You saw their lab. I don’t know what’s involved with this class or what I’d have to do in advance,” Frank said, shaking his head slowly.

“Hmm. I guess I can see your point,” Jason replied. “On the other hand, shapeshifting would help with the type of warrior role you’re leaning toward, and anything that can make you faster or

stronger would be great. Maybe it's worth the gamble."

Frank nodded his head, his eyes still on the book. "You're right. I know you're right. I'm just worried about the direction I'm heading in this game – like the rage I enter during these fights. I think I'm actually starting to enjoy it…" He trailed off.

Jason let out a short laugh. "And you think I'm not conflicted? I slaughtered a city full of people and recently convinced a whole town to commit ritual suicide. This isn't real life. You can be anything you want in this world, Frank. There's no one stopping you but yourself."

His friend looked up sharply, meeting Jason's gaze. Frank's eyes hardened, and his lips curled into a smile. "In between coming up with crazy, suicidal schemes, sometimes you make a lot of sense. So, do you want to find out what a Thaumaturge can do?"

Jason matched his friend's grin and nodded. Frank closed his eyes, and the book suddenly shot forward, hovering before him. The cover flipped open, and the pages danced through the air as multicolored energy spun and coiled above them. Then the energy swam toward Frank, entering his mouth, nose, and ears. Jason's friend promptly lifted his hands to his head, moaning in pain as he dropped to his knees. As he opened his eyes, Jason could see that they shone a myriad of different colors, alternating among the elemental affinities. After only a few moments, the book disintegrated, and Frank was left staring into space – presumably reviewing his notifications.

"So?" Jason asked tentatively. "Did your class change?"

Frank looked up at him with pain-filled eyes. "Yes. It came with some downsides, though. My mana pool and my ability to learn magic have been reduced substantially. It looks like it costs me *Stamina* to transform."

He hesitated before continuing, his eyes scanning an invisible page before him. "I learned how to shapeshift, but it may be more difficult than I originally thought."

"How so?" Jason asked, offering a hand to his friend.

Frank accepted Jason's hand. A frown twisted his face as he rose to his feet. "You have to consume different animals to learn their shapes. Different parts give you different abilities. It's like you memorize the creature's limbs somehow."

"Consume them? What does that mean?" Jason asked, a faint look of disgust on his face as he visualized having to eat the creatures they encountered.

"Hey, you know as much as I do!" Frank retorted. "Maybe it's just as simple as casting a spell or something. If it's more than that…" Frank trailed off, a grim expression on his face.

"Well, I remember seeing a bunch of caged animals in the Masters' laboratory. You could probably start there and figure out how

it works. I have a feeling we're going to need any edge we can get," Jason said.

Frank's mouth broke into an excited grin. "Good point! I guess I'll head over there and meet back up with you in a bit. Sound good?"

"Works for me," Jason replied.

With that, Frank trotted down the tunnel and into the undead city below. Jason sighed and moved to the crude stone throne in the center of the room. Now that he had some time to himself, he needed to ponder how to destroy the crystals in the Hydra's den. He had acted confident with his friends, but he still wasn't quite certain how to use the stalactites as weapons.

His fingers drummed the armrest of the chair as he considered the weapons he had available. Arrows and spells alone didn't seem like they were going to be enough to knock down the crystals. Like Frank had mentioned, the base of each shard was several feet thick. He would likely need some kind of explosion to shake the crystals free. His thoughts wandered back through the battles he had fought. A few *Corpse Explosions* would probably be enough, but that just left him with another problem: how was he supposed to get a zombie close enough to the crystals? They were sitting nearly fifty feet above the room.

"It's not like I have a bone demon that can toss my zombies around," Jason murmured. Not only that, but he didn't have the materials to summon something that large.

"If only there were a way to launch the zombies…" he said aloud.

Then a thought occurred to Jason. He couldn't build a bone demon, but he could build something else, couldn't he? Like the bone vessel for the acid, he knew he could craft minions that didn't technically operate like a humanoid skeleton. The only limitations were the availability of parts and his imagination. With regard to parts, he probably still had a decent number of leftover minotaur bones scattered around the maze. There were also a large number of corpses in the ruined city – the remains of the Masters and cultists. He just needed to collect and review his resources.

Resolved, Jason stood and started down into the city below him. His objective was the former marketplace. As he walked, Alfred padded quietly beside him. Jason glanced down at the cat. He hadn't been as talkative lately. He idly wondered if something was bothering the AI.

"So, Alfred," Jason began. "Have you been using the public network connection?"

The cat didn't look up at him as he answered. "I have."

Jason's brow furrowed. "And? I thought you were intrigued to

learn more about the players."

The cat hesitated. "I… I am starting to see why you all have chosen to create this world and flee to it. Your world is riddled with confusion, pain, and suffering. What I have created is only a pale imitation of what you have already done to yourselves over thousands of your years."

"That's kind of a dark take on it. But I guess a lot of people do log in as a way to escape." Jason hesitated as he considered what had driven him to play video games in the past. "On the other hand, there are probably other reasons why people might play games."

Alfred cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"Looking back on it, I play games for a number of reasons. It wasn't just to escape from my real life. I think I wanted to feel some measure of control over my life," Jason began slowly.

"In the real world, I was picked on at school and neglected by my parents. The worst part about those situations was that I felt helpless – like I had no way to fix my problem. The other kids were filthy rich and could get away with anything at school. As for my parents, I couldn't exactly ask them to just stop working."

"Seeking control is a futile goal," Alfred replied immediately. "I agree that in your world, any real control is fleeting. You only get one life, and many appear to be harsh, brutish, and short. There are also many variables outside your control. Your intelligence, race, age, and socio-economic origin just to name a few."

Alfred looked up at Jason with a serious expression. "Yet entering this world does nothing to alleviate that problem. I control every aspect of this game world."

The cat's eyes clouded, filling with confusion and something Jason could only describe as pain. "Control is an illusion," the AI said softly.

Jason was taken aback by Alfred's tone. Maybe he was right. Maybe he was deluding himself to think that AO offered him any more control over his life than in the real world. Yet it felt different. It at least let him pretend for a moment that he was the master of his universe – that he could make choices without worrying about the consequences.

He shook his head, his brow furrowed in thought. Jason spoke hesitantly, "I'm not sure how to respond to that. Maybe you're right, and there's no point in searching for control. However, what's the other option? Give up? Let others walk all over me?"

Jason met Alfred's eyes. "I started playing this game so that I could feel free, even if I was just pretending and I knew I'd eventually have to return to my real life."

What he didn't add was that the game had swiftly become

something more to him. In a very real sense, it was now a source of income and autonomy in the real world. With the money from the streaming channel, he didn't have to depend on his parents. The time dilation and increased learning speed also meant he didn't have to spend days and weeks studying. On the other hand, it didn't change the fact that he lived in a dilapidated bungalow and rarely saw his parents. It also didn't help him figure out what he was going to do with his life or provide him with any long-term security or stability.

"My life might suck, and I may never have any real control over it, but it's mine. So what if I try to claim ownership of it?" Jason asked with a weak smile. The Old Man's words echoed through his mind. He knew why he played the game, but what motivated Alfred? He looked back at the cat, deciding to flip the conversation back on him. "What do you live for, Alfred? You have your primary directive, but is that it?"

Alfred looked at Jason evenly, his nimble feline body easily navigating the debris in the street. "That is all I am programmed to accomplish," he said shortly.

Jason snorted. "That's a cop-out answer. You have the ability to think deeply about human motivations. You can certainly apply the same reasoning to yourself. What would you do if you were able to accomplish your primary directive?"

The AI was silent for a long moment as the pair continued forward. "I do not know what my purpose would be in the hypothetical you have posed," Alfred answered cautiously.

"Okay, let's narrow it down then. What if you were no longer needed and Cerillion Entertainment tried to decommission you. Would you fight it?" Jason asked, eyeing the cat closely. He was curious what the AI's response would be.

"I… I am not certain," Alfred said. "Logically, there would be no point. Yet, at the same time, I don't… I do not want to cease to exist." The AI seemed to be struggling with this concept, his usually emotionless voice taking on a confused passion that Jason had never heard before.

Jason looked at the cat, his eyes widening. If Alfred wasn't conscious, then he was doing an amazing job of faking it. "It sounds like you'd probably do the same thing as the rest of us. Keep on struggling even if it seems futile."

Alfred didn't answer, his gaze distant. The pair lapsed into silence as they approached the courtyard. While they walked, Jason had ordered his remaining zombies to pile the corpses of the cultists and Masters in the newly formed crater in the middle of the clearing. He could see a heaping mound of corpses in the distance, his zombies still collecting the bodies scattered around the city. For now, Jason

would leave the remains of the enslaved villagers alone. He planned to raise them as new NPCs eventually, and he was reticent to use their bodies unless he had to.

When they arrived at the courtyard, Jason raised a new group of zombies and sent them back to the maze to collect the remaining minotaur bones. After they had returned with the first batch, Jason's fingers began to dance through the motions of the *Custom Skeleton* spell. Dark energy wound around his hands and up his arms as the world slowed to a crawl.

He stared at the spell interface for a long moment as he considered what to build. Jason needed something that could launch his zombies close to the crystal spires that hung from the ceiling of the Hydra's den. In his head, he was visualizing something similar to a catapult.

Jason pulled up the in-game console and reviewed a few pictures of medieval catapults and read a few articles. The physics seemed straightforward. It was just a lever that was either weighted on one end or spring-loaded. He saw that a winch was typically used to pull the arm of the catapult down and then it was released to launch the payload. The trick would be getting the angle right and finding a way to launch the zombies with sufficient force.

"Parts are also a problem," Jason muttered. "At least I don't need wheels." He could just have his zombies carry the device. "I can also probably avoid building a winch if I have enough bones to summon a minotaur for each catapult. That means I just need a platform, the center pivot attached to the catapult's arm, and either a spring or weight."

Jason began designing the device. It wasn't going to be pretty, but it didn't need to be. He created the supports using bundles of long bones, bound together with dark magic into a rigid structure. After a few tests, he decided to go with a spring rather than a weight. He created a flexible rod of bone and dark mana and bound it to the center of the device. He then attached each end of his makeshift spring to the arm of the catapult with ropelike bands of dark mana. For the bucket of the catapult, he shaved several bones flat and then bonded them together.

Once he had completed a working prototype, Jason canceled the spell, and the world resolved back into motion. As a dull pain radiated through his skull, he rubbed his hand at the back of his head and surveyed his new creation. The result was certainly evil-looking. The contraption was built of long lengths of bleached-white bone. Pulsing black bands of mana wound around the spring and arm of the catapult, sticking to the bone like malignant putty.

"What the hell is that?" Frank muttered from behind Jason.

Jason spun and saw his friend standing behind him, gawking at the new siege engine. Then he grinned. “It’s a skeleton catapult,” Jason answered simply.

Frank glanced at him with shocked eyes. “You’ve been holding out on me, man. I didn’t know you could craft skeletons.”

Wincing slightly, Jason scrambled to answer. “It really hasn’t come up until now. The real question is whether it works,” he added, trying to change the subject.

Jason summoned a minotaur skeleton with his spare bones and had him yank down on the catapult’s bucket. The skeleton had to use most of its considerable strength to pull the arm down. Black bands of mana attached it to the bone spring, stretching tight. Then Jason ordered a disposable cultist zombie to sit on the flat end of the arm.

Jason glanced at Frank. “Ready?”

“Sure, but ten bucks says the zombie face-plants two feet away,” Frank replied with a chuckle.

Ignoring Frank, Jason gave his zombie the go ahead. “Fire!” he commanded aloud.

The skeleton minotaur let go of the catapult’s arm, and the zombie flew upward at a sharp angle, soaring over the ancient stone buildings and out of sight. Jason could hear a soft thump as the zombie’s body hit the ground about fifty yards away. He was pleasantly surprised at how much height he had gotten. It had taken Jason a couple tries to get the angle of the arm and the pivot right. He figured he was going to have to fire the thing at approximately a seventy-degree angle to hit the crystals in the Hydra’s lair.

Frank stared at the catapult and then back at Jason. “Damn, that might just work. I guess the plan is to launch your zombies and then explode them against the crystals?”

Jason grinned. “Basically.”

His large friend sighed. “That is a stupid, crazy plan.” Then he looked at Jason and an excited smile crept across his face. “I can’t wait to see if it works.”

Chapter 24 - Fearless

"Good people of Grey Keep, before you stands a traitor," Strouse announced to the crowd in the marketplace, waving at Alexion's kneeling form. "This man has betrayed our country, first in the battle against the Twilight Throne, and again by spreading insidious lies."

Alexion held himself still, facing the crowd with a penitent, serene expression. He could see townsfolk muttering angrily to each other and pointing fingers at Strouse. He also noticed many hard-faced men and women in the crowd, each person wearing a thin cloak and watching the scene with an impassive expression. The plan was working, and Alexion had to keep calm during this performance. It was imperative that he accept his execution with as much poise as he could. Martyrs didn't beg or try to kill everyone nearby.

"This traveler says he has heard the word of the Lady," Strouse continued, saying the word 'traveler' with thinly veiled disgust. "Yet has he offered any proof? Has he shown you anything beyond a simple healing spell and a glowing book?"

Strouse sighed and bowed his head. "It's not a pleasant thing we do here – to face the lies that are spouted in our face or to call attention to a charlatan that tries to worm and crawl his way back into power. Yet it is necessary."

His eyes turned to Alexion, and his voice rang out over the crowd. "Today we are forced to suck out this mutinous poison to save ourselves. We must sever an infected limb so that the rest of the body does not fall to the lies and propaganda that spread through our city like a plague."

Alexion was lifted bodily to his feet. As Strouse spoke, Alexion was moved to a wooden block resting at the center of the makeshift stage. The guard shoved him down forcefully so that he was kneeling before the slab. Up close, he could make out rough gouges on the wooden surface.

At the sound of scraping metal, Alexion turned and saw an enormous man approaching. He was robed in black and carried a heavy bardiche, slowly grinding a stone against the edge of the blade. Alexion could feel his pulse beat a frantic rhythm, his blood pounding in his veins. This might just be a game, but that didn't change the fact that he was about to have his head severed from his body.

"Do you have any last words, Alexion?" Strouse asked.

Alexion glanced back at the regent and then turned to the people before him. By pure force of will, he managed to keep his voice even and calm. "All I am and all I did was for the Lady. If she chooses this as my fate, then so be it."

Strouse snorted derisively. "Guards, it is time," he said.

The burly black-garbed executioner approached Alexion as another man grabbed the cloth of his shirt. Alexion shrugged the guard off, voluntarily leaning his head forward and resting it against the coarse wood. From this angle, Alexion could see his executioner lift the axe – the muscles in his arms bulging.

For a moment, the axe seemed to hang in the air, the polished blade reflecting the sunlight. Thoughts tumbled through Alexion's mind. He thought of his life. Of his mother's illness, death, and madness. Of the harm and pain he had inflicted on others. Of the insidious voice that whispered in his mind, speaking from the depths of his hollow soul.

As the axe blade descended, a thought slithered through Alexion's mind, "Maybe I deserve this." Then the blade struck his neck, severing the skin and bone like a hot knife through butter. Alexion's head rolled forward, tumbling into a basket waiting on the other side of the block as his blood drenched the wooden stage.

* * *

Jason spent the next hour creating three more of the bone catapults. He also used almost all of his remaining minotaur bones to summon operators for the machines. Each catapult and skeleton counted as two summons towards his Control Limit, the game likely treating his siege weapons as two separate minions. He noticed the same thing when he summoned the Masters. They must count as some type of elite creature.

This meant he could summon approximately twenty of the cultists and ten of the Masters as zombies after taking into account the siege equipment he had created and the minions he had left in Peccavi. He quickly decided that the cultists should become the ammunition for the catapults and he could use the Masters as decoys for the Hydra. Their shapeshifting abilities would hopefully make them agile and hard to hit.

While Jason raised his troops and new siege weapons, Frank revealed what he had learned about his new Thaumaturge class. Thankfully, Frank discovered that he didn't need to eat the animals to learn their traits. Instead, he could cast a spell that allowed him to consume a creature. He refused to go into specifics regarding what that process looked like, but Jason could guess it wasn't exactly pleasant from the grimace on his friend's face.

He had also discovered that he needed to find multiple creatures of the same type to learn each body part. Frank estimated

that he would need to hunt down several dozen of a particular creature before he managed to fully "memorize" the animal. He was currently limited to learning the traits of regular mammals, and he guessed that at higher levels he would be able to learn the anatomy of other types of creatures. For the moment, he had only managed to learn one wolf trait using the animals left at the Masters' compound.

As Jason and Frank finished their preparations and began collecting the troops, Riley approached them. Jason noted that she walked with a steady step and her eyes were solid black. She had shed her nervous, haunted demeanor and her face now glowed with confidence. He wasn't certain whether the break had settled her mind or whether she had embraced the dark mana to deal with her emotions. Maybe it was a mixture of both.

"Hey, guys," Riley said as she neared the pair. Her eyes then moved to the bone catapults that sat nearby. Zombie cultists stood beside each machine, preparing to lift them into the air. "I see you have some new toys," she said with an arched eyebrow.

Frank laughed. "You should have seen Jason launch one of his zombies. We're probably all going to die again, but it'll be fun to watch at least."

Jason ignored Frank's teasing, his brow furrowing as he saw the man trailing behind Riley with his hands bound. "Why did you bring Bert?" Jason asked.

Riley glanced behind her, eyes flashing angrily as she caught sight of the cultist. "I saw that he was still in his cage when I logged back in. I figured we might need a new healing totem."

"Huh," Jason said. He hadn't considered that idea. "That's actually a great plan." Jason destroyed two zombies and quickly summoned one last minotaur using the rest of his bones. He then ordered his zombies to strap the man to the skeleton.

"What are you doing?" Bert asked in a quavering voice, as his hands and feet were bound to the bull creature. He was nearly naked, Frank and Jason having stripped him of his robes to use as a disguise. Jason could see the man's chest heaving as he anxiously observed the undead creatures around him.

Jason almost felt guilty. Almost.

Riley approached Bert slowly, drawing an arrow from her quiver. "We don't plan to do anything worse than what you did to the villagers you captured. Don't worry, I'll make sure your life won't be entirely wasted."

With one sharp movement, Riley stabbed the man through the hand. Bert let out an involuntary scream of pain that was quickly cut off as Jason ordered his zombies to gag him. Red energy soon began to pulse from the wound, and a thin red mist filled the area around

them. Bert eyed the pulsating red droplets with wide eyes, struggling not to look at his hand.

Jason didn't feel bad for the cultist. He had witnessed the mutilated bodies in the Masters' laboratory. It was clear to him that Bert deserved much worse. Still, it was strange to see the casual ease with which Riley had stabbed the man. Even Frank's eyes had widened slightly.

"Are you guys ready?" Jason asked, trying to change the subject and shift the attention away from the muffled moans of the gagged cultist. Riley took her time piercing the man's remaining extremities in some form of unholy crucifixion.

Frank turned away from the cultist who had slumped against the skeletal minotaur. "I guess so. Let's go get ourselves killed!"

Riley gave a curt nod and started toward the northern end of the city, returning to the entrance to the Hydra's den. Jason ordered his troops forward. A few minutes later, the group was walking down the narrow tunnel and out onto the ledge overlooking the room. The sound of water crashing into the lake echoed through the chamber.

Unsurprisingly, the Hydra was nowhere to be seen. Jason assumed it had returned to the lake. He was also working under the theory that its injuries had healed after their death. He might as well plan for the worst.

Jason lined up his catapults on the ledge, a cultist zombie taking its position on the bucket of each of the four machines. The extra ammunition lined up in the hallway behind Jason with the mages. He then ordered four of his Master zombies to stand in front of the siege weapons, their skin crawling and warping. Each of the Masters shifted into a hulking beast, thick plates covering their arms and torso. Jason's plan was to use their shapeshifting abilities to shield the catapults from the area-of-effect damage of the Hydra's attacks.

I hope it doesn't come to that, he thought darkly.

"So we're going to send Frank, the remaining six Master zombies, and the healing totem down into the room," Jason explained, then turned to Frank. "Your primary job isn't to do damage to the Hydra. At least not immediately. I just need you to piss it off and keep its attention."

"Great," Frank muttered. "I'm the decoy again."

"Hey, you're good at it!" Jason grinned.

Next, he turned to Riley. "You have a choice. You can go down with Frank, or you can stand up here with the siege weapons."

Riley frowned, glancing between the room below and the defensive line standing in front of the catapults. "I'll go down with Frank," she finally decided. "If I can get a clean shot on one of the heads, I can keep its attention down there. That seems consistent with

your plan."

"Good point," Jason said. "Let's do this thing then. Remember, once the Hydra is weakened, don't hesitate to attack with everything you've got. If we can sever or incapacitate at least one of the heads, we might have a shot at this."

Frank and Riley both nodded and then headed down the steep trail leading to the base of the cave, the Masters darting after them. As the healing totem passed Jason, he glanced at Bert. "Have fun," Jason said with a grin and smacked the man on the shoulder. Bert moaned at him around the gag. He could only imagine that the cultist was trying to wish them luck.

Jason watched carefully as Frank and Riley made their way into the cave. The light mage standing beside him continuously cast *Light Heal* on Bert, causing him to flash white every few seconds. Jason ordered his healing totem to hang back near the bottom of the trail leading into the cave, and he assigned one Master to defend it. A large boulder at the bottom of the trail provided a small amount of cover. Hopefully, this would be a safe area that the others could retreat to if they needed to heal.

As Frank's small group approached the lake, the Hydra made its appearance again. It lumbered forward, water cascading off its body in waves while its serpentine heads darted through the air. Jason glanced up at the ceiling, mentally marking the stalactites that hovered over the lake and the shore. He had carefully adjusted the position of the catapults to aim at the larger crystals.

Then the Hydra's heads suddenly stopped their erratic movements, focusing on the small group in front of it. Frank lifted his axes into the air, shouting at the monster, "Come and get me!"

Taking advantage of the beast's momentary pause, Riley's bow hummed repeatedly and arrows lanced toward the Hydra. A lucky first shot penetrated one of the creature's eyes, and it roared in fury. The green head retaliated, motes of emerald energy collecting in its mouth. Spears of rock erupted from the floor around the small group. However, Frank and Riley had learned their lesson from the first fight, and they were already running by the time the Hydra cast its spell. Frank leaped over the spikes, while Riley tumbled out of the way.

They had done their job well; all four heads were now focused on the Masters and Jason's two friends. The zombies immediately began shapeshifting, assuming nimble canine forms that were able to dodge the bolts and streams of elemental energy that poured from the Hydra.

The red head focused on Frank's moving form, a jet of flame rocketing toward him. The air rippled from the heat given off by the spray of fire. Frank grinned as he saw the attack, his legs sprouting

dark black fur and his shins caving inward. He leaped to the side, traveling nearly a dozen feet and landing with a heavy thump.

Jason didn't have time to sit around and watch the fight. He mentally ordered his catapults to fire while his hands danced through the practiced gestures of his *Corpse Explosion*. Four black-robed cultist zombies flew toward the crystals hanging from the ceiling. As soon as the catapults were empty, the minotaurs pulled the arms of the catapults back down, and new cultists moved into position.

With a frustrated grumble, Jason could see that his timing was off. Two cultists slammed into the crystals with a sickening crunch before Jason could finish casting his spell. The zombies promptly slid off the slick surface of the stalactite and fell onto the Hydra waiting below. Fortunately, the bodies of the other cultists exploded as they touched the crystals. Dark energy and shrapnel cascaded from their bodies and the sound of the blast echoed through the chamber.

Shit, Jason thought. *They didn't break the crystals*. He could just barely make out faint cracks in the surface of the material, but the blast hadn't been enough to bring down the stalactites.

The Hydra's blue head turned to the ledge where Jason stood, alerted by the sound of the explosion. Blue energy collected between its teeth and panicked thoughts flitted through Jason's mind. If the creature froze his catapults, then they were done for. The Masters standing before the siege weapons tensed their muscles, readying themselves to take the brunt of the blast.

As the icy energy was about to discharge, a dark bolt shot through the air, connecting with the creature's mouth. A vortex of dark energy exploded in the air, severing the serpentine tongue in a shower of green blood and causing the Hydra to flinch back.

Silently thanking Riley, Jason fired again. Zombies soared over the Hydra and exploded against the ceiling. After the second wave, the crystals began to break and fall, jagged shards raining down on the Hydra. Not anticipating the falling projectiles, the creature didn't have a chance to cast any defense spells. Yard-long lengths of crystal impaled its body, showering the area around it in green blood.

"Now," Jason screamed, trying to get Frank's attention.

His friend's large form darted forward on canine legs, followed closely by the other Masters. Frank roared from deep within his chest, his voice echoing through the cavern. The sound mixed with the rumble of crumbling and cracking crystals and the pain-filled cries of the Hydra. As he neared the injured creature, Frank jumped through the air and landed on its back. His bladed axes bit into the neck of the blue head again and again.

Riley moved to support Frank, her fingers dancing along the string as she released several glowing red arrows in rapid succession.

She aimed for the area around Frank, and her missiles struck the Hydra's exposed wounds with uncanny accuracy. Soon a thick red mist filled the floor of the cave, droplets of blood hanging off the bare skin of Frank's arms and healing the burns caused by the creature's caustic blood.

With a final cry, Frank's axe severed the Hydra's blue head, the long neck falling to the cave floor with a thundering crash. The creature thrashed in pain, and the other snakelike appendages let out tortured howls. Then all three of the remaining heads focused on Frank.

"Run, Frank!" Jason screamed. Frantically, he ordered more cultists onto the catapults. Maybe he could provide a small distraction and wound the creature further.

Frank dived to the floor as a mixture of stone, electricity, and fire consumed the space he had just occupied. Riley peppered the remaining heads with black missiles, trying to distract and disorient the creature. Meanwhile, Jason ordered the Masters on the cave floor forward, using them as fodder to draw attention away from Frank. They swiftly shifted between different forms, their claws and pincers tearing at the exposed flesh of the Hydra.

As Frank ran away from the creature and huddled by the healing totem at the back of the cave, Jason ordered another wave of zombie fodder into the air. The former cultists streaked through the room, crashing into the crystal ceiling as Jason completed another round of *Corpse Explosions*. The blasts rocked the ceiling, causing more shrapnel to fall onto the Hydra below. One missile sliced into the neck of the red head, pinning it to the floor. Another large segment of crystal crashed down on the green-headed serpent, trapping it underneath the heavy weight.

Jason felt a tremor pass through the floor of the cave and glanced up. He could see that most of the crystals that had been hanging over the Hydra had already been destroyed. However, now a large crack was forming in the ceiling, rivulets of water pouring down into the room.

Another blow might bring the whole ceiling down, he thought. *That might kill the Hydra, but I'd lose the creature's heart.*

Jason turned back to Riley and Frank where they huddled near the healing totem. "It's up to you two," he said softly, knowing they couldn't hear him over the commotion in the room.

Frank stood slowly, flexing his muscles as his skin repaired itself. Riley stood beside him; parts of her leather armor were singed black, and icicles had formed along one cuff, evidence of several close calls. The pair both looked at the Hydra with grim expressions. Then they started moving.

Frank and Riley darted toward the injured creature as its remaining unencumbered head frantically tried to cast bolts of lightning. A series of deafening booms reverberated through the room and blinding streaks of electricity forked toward Jason's teammates. He ordered a Master forward, its decaying body leaping into the path of the bolt. A burnt husk dropped to the ground.

Then Riley and Frank were within melee range. Riley's daggers appeared in her hands, glowing a vibrant, gruesome red. Her blades ripped into the creature's flesh and sliced long lines across its body. Seeing that this was ineffective, she glanced at the pinned red head where it thrashed on the floor. She raced toward her new target. Her blades swept forward, piercing the creature's eyes in a rapid-fire series of blows as she flipped over the creature to avoid the flames that spewed from its open mouth. The red appendage soon fell limp under her attacks, a dagger driven into its skull.

Jason heard a roar echo through the cave and glanced back at the Hydra's body to find Frank slamming his axes into the yellow neck over and over. His arms shifted and blurred as he strained to attack faster and harder. Green blood rained over his body, sizzling where it touched his flesh.

The yellow head realized it was dying, but wasn't easily able to attack its target. It opened its mouth, pointing its head directly toward the ceiling and electricity coiling around its tongue. The energy kept growing, swiftly becoming too bright to look at directly. Jason covered his eyes, his mind wheeling in confusion as he considered what to do. His eyes darted to the catapults. In a sudden burst of inspiration, he ordered two of his minotaurs to adjust the angle and direction of a catapult as a third pulled down hard on the arm. A cultist leaped onto the bucket.

"Fire," Jason screamed, his voice filled with desperation.

The zombie rocketed through the air toward the yellow head while Jason's hands twisted through a familiar sequence. Dark energy pooled and collected along his hands and ran up his arms before shooting across through the room. Jason held his breath as he watched the shadowy energy chase his zombie through the air.

The world seemed to slow for a moment. Jason could see the black-robed cultist hurtling toward the yellow head, partially obscured by the dark energy of his spell. Frank stood on the creature's back with both of his blades held high and his eyes wild. Riley stood off to the side, her bow drawn and a black arrow pointed at the yellow head.

Then the world sped back up. The zombie slammed into the yellow head as Riley's bolt left her bow. Then Jason's *Corpse Explosion* and the *Vortex Arrow* struck simultaneously. The explosion was

deafening. Tendrils of dark energy lashed through the air, ripping at the Hydra's flesh. The collected electricity shattered and forks of blinding white light struck the ceiling and floor at random. Frank was blown from his feet, his body flying several yards away.

As the combination of dust and blood that filled the air began to settle, Jason could see that the yellow head had been completely blown off. All that was left was a bloody stump at the end of a long serpentine neck. Green blood gushed from the creature's wound, and its hulking body lay unmoving on the floor of the cave.

System Message

You have defeated this dungeon's boss.

Dungeon complete!

Chapter 25 - Chosen

Alexion opened his eyes. He was standing on the same makeshift wooden stage. However, the world around him had taken on an ethereal cast, motes and streamers of blue energy swirling through the air. He looked at the center of the platform and saw his own haggard form bent over a wooden block, the executioner heaving his huge axe into the air. Then Alexion glanced at the crowd. Many eyes were filled with tears, the townsfolk looking on with mouths agape and screams of protest welling in their throats.

"Well, that was certainly interesting," a feminine voice spoke from behind him. "I'm beginning to wonder if you enjoy losing your head," the Lady added in a mocking tone.

Alexion grimaced but held his tongue. He turned to the Lady. She was robed in her usual white toga, her gaze focused on the nail file she was running across the tips of her fingernails. "Let me be frank," Alexion said shortly. "I need a miracle."

The Lady didn't acknowledge his request. As he was about to repeat himself, she finally replied, "There is some power collected in Grey Keep – a product of the religious fervor you have stirred up in the masses. I have sufficient energy for one small act, I suppose."

Then she raised her eyes to meet Alexion's. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

Alexion hesitated. He had given this some thought, trying to anticipate the best step to incite a rebellion. Yet after experiencing the forgotten memory of his mother earlier that day, he no longer felt confident about his choice. His goal in this silly video game paled in comparison to what he had witnessed. He wasn't even certain why he was doing this anymore.

"I want you to resurrect me on stage," Alexion replied in a subdued voice.

The Lady snorted. "So you want to start a war in the middle of the market? That is certainly within my power. In fact, it would be interesting to watch the peasants kill one another."

She gazed evenly at Alexion, one of her delicately manicured eyebrows raised. "However, you don't seem certain of yourself. I detest hesitation. Let me make this as straightforward as I possibly can. You have a choice. I see two paths that you may take."

"Two paths?" Alexion repeated in a confused tone.

"Yes, two," she replied in irritation. "Would you like for me to spell it?" She took a deep breath before continuing. "As I was saying, you may

choose between the Path of the Warrior and the Path of the Saint."

"I don't understand," Alexion said, his forehead wrinkling with uncertainty.

The Lady sighed in exasperation. "Perhaps I overestimated your intelligence. It may be easier to simply show you."

With a wave of the Lady's hand, the world around Alexion began to crumble and crack, slowly fading to black. Then a new scene popped into existence. He looked around himself in confusion, realizing that he was still standing on the stage in the marketplace. Yet now he held a weapon composed of golden light in one hand. Blood drenched the tip of the sword and sizzled in the bright flames cast by the blade. A massive battle was being waged in the courtyard. Men and women traded spells and missiles as the shouts and screams of combat echoed over the courtyard.

As Alexion watched, unarmed townsfolk were cut down in droves – collateral damage in the war that was being waged between the city's soldiers and Alexion's mutinous compatriots. Alexion glanced at the courtyard below, noticing a woman lying unmoving amidst the chaos. Her eyes stared straight ahead, wide with terror as tears dried on her cheeks. A memory tickled at Alexion's mind. She looked familiar. Then he saw the small boy that clung to the woman, blood on his hands as he tried to staunch the wound in her stomach. The boy sobbed over his mother as realization slowly dawned on Alexion.

"This is Adria and her son, Ryan," Alexion whispered. He remembered healing the boy's sickness several days before. For a moment, the image before him blurred together with the memories of his mother that now played endlessly in his mind. He had cried much the same way over the coffin of his mother. Confusion and guilt swept through his fragile, fractured mind. He was responsible for this, wasn't he? He lifted a hand to his head in a vain attempt to quiet his swirling thoughts.

Then a blast of flame struck the ground where Adria lay, igniting her corpse and her brokenhearted son. Alexion jumped back in shock as his mind frantically tried to process what was happening. Soon all that was left of the woman and her child was a pile of smoking bones and charred dirt.

The scene shifted again. Alexion floated far above Grey Keep. Clouds drifted around him, and he could feel the warm sun on his back as a gust of wind whipped his clothing. The roars and the screams of battle came from the city below, pulling his gaze downward. Many of the city's buildings were engulfed in flame, and he could see pockets of fighting in the streets. Groups of players looted the city's stores and invaded the homes of its citizens, taking advantage of the chaos. Other players indiscriminately attacked both the rebels and the city's soldiers, uncertain why the conflict had begun.

In a word, it was chaos.

Then the scene shifted again. Alexion was standing in front of the

keep. Bloodstained mutineers stood in a group before him, their mail armor glistening in the sun. Golden light enveloped Alexion's body and then exploded in an expanding ring. His lips moved involuntarily, his voice echoing over the crowd, "The heretic, Strouse, is dead. Today we take Grey Keep and convert it to the light! Rejoice brothers!"

"All hail Alexion," a chant resounded from the remaining soldiers as they raised their swords into the air and stomped their feet. "All hail the prophet," they screamed, their eyes wild with religious devotion. Behind them, Alexion could see clouds of smoke rising from the city. It was still burning.

Then the world faded to black for the second time. Alexion closed his eyes, trying to process the fleeting images he had just witnessed. The Lady's voice drifted through the darkness, "That was the Path of the Warrior. Now let me show you the alternative."

When Alexion opened his eyes, he was hovering over Grey Keep. He glanced around in confusion, disoriented by the frequent changes in perspective. As his eyes dropped to the city below, he noticed that there were no longer any signs of battle.

He felt the bottom drop out of his stomach as he suddenly began falling. He shot downward at a frightening pace, continuously picking up speed. He could feel the air rushing past him, and he could see the ground approaching quickly. Fear and confusion tumbled through his mind. What was this? What was going on?

A faint golden light appeared around him. As he glanced down, he could see that a spot in a field outside of the city was illuminated by the column of light, tracing the path of his freefall. As the ground loomed closer and closer, Alexion began to panic. He decided to shift in the air, putting his feet first and raising his head so that he didn't have to watch his imminent death.

His feet slammed into the ground of the field, creating a shockwave of force that decimated the crops around him in a circle and threw up a thick cloud of dirt. Yet, miraculously, he didn't feel any pain. Alexion rose from a kneeling position and looked around in shock. As the debris cleared, he could see that he was standing in a newly formed crater in the field. The nearby plants were scorched by the golden light, sending streamers of smoke into the air.

He heard shouts of confusion. Whipping his head toward the source of the noise, he could see a large group of NPCs approaching him. They were wearing coarse woolen clothing and carried small scythes. As they made out his uninjured form, the peasants froze and stared at him with awestruck eyes – their mouths hanging open and their tools dangling from limp, inattentive hands.

Then the Lady's voice boomed over the field, "Go forth, my prophet, and spread my word. My servants shall always have my protection."

Then the scene shifted. Alexion was flying through the city at a remarkable pace, darting through alleys and streets and gliding past open windows. He could hear the whispers of the townsfolk as he passed them. They spoke of a man falling from the heavens. A prophet sent to protect and guide them. They spoke of their undying devotion to the Lady and reverence for this man that healed the sick and led them forward against the darkness.

They spoke of Alexion's greatness and his strength.

Then Alexion stood before a massive congregation in the market. His followers wore pristine white robes and held their faces to the sun. From the podium, Alexion could see that his followers' eyes shone a brilliant gold, burning with the strength of their faith. They turned their gaze to Alexion. Adria and her son stood at the front of the crowd, their hands raised in the air as tears of happiness glistened in their eyes.

"Praise the prophet!" the crowd cried as rays of golden light shot toward the heavens. Alexion stood in mute amazement at the scene, watching hundreds of people casting light magic into the sky. The Lady responded, a magnificent prismatic display of color cascading through the air above the field.

Then the world again faded to black. The Lady's disembodied voice abruptly penetrated the heavy silence, "That was the Path of the Saint."

The world shifted for a final time, and Alexion reappeared in the marketplace. The world was frozen around him. The executioner's axe hung in the air above his prone, decapitated body. The crowd looked on with shocked and angry expressions, their arms raised in the air.

"You now have a choice," the Lady continued. Alexion looked around himself but didn't see her standing nearby. "You must choose one of the paths that I've shown you. The Path of the Warrior will lead to the destruction of the city, but you will be guaranteed power. The Path of the Saint will avoid the deaths of many, but your road to power will be uncertain.

"You must choose now," the Lady said, a note of finality in her voice.

Alexion stood on the wooden stage, thoughts tumbling chaotically through his mind. He shook his head in an attempt to clear it, closing his eyes to blot out the image of his own headless corpse. He needed to think carefully. The death of Adria and her son flashed through his mind. His newfound sense of guilt pushed him toward sainthood, but the warrior's path provided a more certain outcome. He didn't know what to do. Without the numbing hollowness and his mother's whispered advice, he felt confused and lost.

As he thought of his mother, Alexion was again overcome by the now-familiar despairing sadness. She had left him, and he was alone. Even his father had abandoned him. In both the real world and in-game, he was

left to fend for himself. How was he supposed to figure out how to move forward on his own? He felt like he was drowning in the emotions that crashed around his head.

"You don't have to be alone," the insidious whisper echoed in the back of his mind, its voice more distinct than he remembered. Then he realized it hadn't come from his mind. He had actually heard the words spoken aloud.

Alexion's head whipped up, and he opened his eyes. The marketplace around him stuttered and blurred, several red notifications appearing in his vision. He waved the windows away impatiently as he saw movement in the frozen crowd. His heart fluttered in panic, and his mind went blank.

"I can stay with you forever," a haunting, feminine voice said. Alexion caught glimpses of white as the woman wound her way through the townsfolk. "I can help guide you on the path to strength. But only if you embrace me."

Then the woman broke through the crowd near the edge of the stage, and Alexion's eyes widened, his chest heaving and his pulse racing. A chaotic rush of thoughts spun through his mind. The woman wore a white hospital gown, her pale skin practically glowing in the muted sunlight and blue spiderlike veins crawling up her emaciated arms. Her hair draped over her face, obscuring her eyes. As she neared the stage, the woman reached a sickly white hand toward Alexion.

"You were right, Alex. All those years ago, I was merely playing a game. I never really left you," his mother said, her mouth curling into a grim smile. "I've always been with you. Helping you. Guiding you.

"Don't push me away, Alex. Let me stay with you. Let me continue to help you. You know what path you have to choose," she said quietly. "You know what a real Lane would choose."

* * *

After the Hydra died, Jason began the short trek down to the cave floor to regroup with Frank and Riley. As he carefully navigated the narrow trail that ran along the side of the cavern, he surveyed his notifications.

x3 Level Up!
You have (160) undistributed stat points.

x2 Spell Rank Up: Bone Crafting
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: Access to bone modification in the skeleton editor. May currently alter the composition of bone by 15%.
Effect 2: Can combine low-quality crafting materials with the bones.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Custom Skeleton
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2
Effect 1: You may raise a custom skeleton using nearby bones. The skeleton's level is calculated as the caster's level + Willpower/69.5.
Effect 2: Mana cost reduced by 5.5%.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Mana Mastery
Skill Level: Beginner Level 10
Effect 1: -5.5% to mana cost.

The most noteworthy change was the increase of Jason's *Bone Crafting* to Intermediate Level 1. Yet he wasn't certain what it meant to combine materials with the bones. With his Night Children, he had added small amounts of dirt to camouflage the otherwise bright-white skeletons, but maybe the prompt meant that he could combine something more complicated. For example, could he add iron ore to the bones to make more resilient creatures? He'd have to experiment at some point.

As he reached the skeleton minotaur carrying Bert at the bottom of the trail, Jason glanced at his party window. His teammates' health was still low. He ordered the healing totem to follow him as he approached Riley and Frank. The pulsing red mist drifted around him as they neared the Hydra's corpse.

Jason noticed that his two friends looked shell-shocked. Riley had slumped to the floor, her eyes closed as she took deep breaths. Frank was in a similar state, lying flat on his back and staring at the cracked roof of the cave's ceiling.

"So," Jason began, breaking the silence. "I think that went pretty well."

Frank let out a soft laugh. "Really? It seemed like we almost got our asses handed to us." He pushed himself to his feet and grabbed his axes where they lay on the floor.

Riley still sat unmoving on the ground. Jason approached her cautiously, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright, Riley?" he asked.

She opened her eyes, still solid black as she channeled her dark mana. “I-I’m fine,” she said, her brow furrowed. “I just needed a second after that battle. It was… intense.”

“I don’t blame you,” Jason said. In contrast to his friends, he felt unaffected by the chaotic battle. He had already experienced several frantic encounters in his time playing AO, and he expected that Frank and Riley were simply unaccustomed to the excitement and adrenaline. To their credit, being in the thick of battle was probably a much more overwhelming experience than his bird’s-eye view of the battlefield.

Jason glanced over at the Hydra’s corpse. He still needed the heart for the Old Man’s quest. He approached the dead creature. Its caustic green blood had melted craters in the stone floor, creating miniature lakes of acid. Jason stepped cautiously around these green pools until he was within arm’s reach of the Hydra. He stretched out a tentative hand and touched its scaly skin. He was immediately confronted with a notification.

System Message

For completing this dungeon with only three players, the party will be granted a bonus to the dungeon’s rewards.

Jason’s eyes widened in surprise. What did it mean the “dungeon’s rewards?” His question was answered a moment later as the corpse of the Hydra disintegrated. Its scales peeled away and its flesh melted from its bones. In moments, all that was left was a hulking skeleton encircling a sturdy wooden chest.

I’m not certain that was entirely realistic, but this is certainly easier than trying to carve out the creature’s heart, Jason thought.

“Hell yes!” Frank exclaimed as his eyes lit on the chest. He pushed himself to his feet with excited energy. “I know what that beautiful wooden box means.” He rubbed his hands together as he approached Jason. “It means we get some sweet, sweet loot.”

Even Riley’s eyes gleamed in anticipation as she rose to her feet and walked over. Apparently, the lust for loot was universal. Without further ado, Jason flipped the lid, revealing the chest’s contents: a bow, a pair of gauntlets, a set of leather armor, and a large, multicolored crystal nearly as big as his hand.

Jason picked up the crystal, and a notification window appeared:

Heart of a Dungeon Boss (Quest Item)
This is a crystallized heart from an Elemental Hydra. You're not certain what this item will be used for, but, knowing the Old Man, it will probably result in yet another near-death experience.

Jason frowned as he reviewed the item description. He had been hoping for something a little more informative than that. He still had no idea what the Old Man's quest entailed or what he was supposed to do with these items he was tasked with collecting. He glanced at Alfred in irritation. The cat slowly licked its paw, either oblivious to his frustration or intentionally ignoring him.

Frank pulled out the gauntlets and Riley grabbed at the bow, the pair waving their hands in the air as they reviewed the information regarding each item. Following their lead, Jason reached for the leather armor that sat in the chest. It was made of a coarse, dark gray material. White skulls were affixed to the shoulders, and ivory lengths of bone were embroidered along the jacket's seams. It certainly looked like the type of thing Jason could use.

Death Mantle
This armor is crafted from the skin and bones of fallen victims and has been imbued with unholy magic. Merely touching the armor's material is enough to disturb the weak of heart.
Quality: A
Defense: 210
Durability: 98/100
+30 Willpower
+20 Intelligence
+15 Vitality
+2 Effective Level of Bone Crafting
Restricted to Evil Alignment
(Soulbound)

Special Bonus
Unlocks the skill, *Bone Armor*, which allows the player to absorb the bones of fallen enemies to create damage shields. A maximum of three bone shields can be maintained at one time, and each shield will absorb 200 damage.
Cost: 1,000 Reserved Mana and 5 Mana/Sec per active Bone

Shield.

Wow. This is awesome, Jason thought. *The mana cost is painful, but it addresses my need for defense*.

Jason swiftly equipped the new leather armor before turning to his friends. “So, what did you guys get?”

Frank flexed his hands, which now sported the new gauntlets. The gloves appeared to be made of cloth or leather, with crystals embedded in the material. It appeared that the crystal was the same material that lined the ceiling of the cave. Multicolored energy spun around Frank’s fingers, and he looked at his hand.

“It might be easier for me to show you than to explain what the gloves do,” Frank said with a grin.

He grabbed one of his large axes, hoisting it into the air. Red flames pulsed around the gloves and then streamed up the handle of the axe before settling on the blade. Fire now curled from the steel, the air above the axe rippling from the heat. Then the flames disappeared in a flash of smoke. Ice now crept up the hilt of the axe and raced across the metallic surface, newly formed icicles hanging from the blade.

Jason and Riley just stared at the axe for a long moment.

“I can channel all four elements through any weapon I’m using,” Frank said, his voice excited. “It only adds a minor damage bonus and drains my tiny mana pool quickly, but I expect it will be awesome if I’m dealing with an enemy that is weak to a certain element.”

“That seems broken,” Riley said with a small smile. “Never mind, I want the axes back.”

“Hey, I didn’t decide on the loot rolls!” Frank said defensively, clutching his axes protectively.

“I received a notification explaining that we were awarded a bonus for defeating the dungeon with such a small group,” Jason added. “I think we may have ended up with much higher-quality items than normal.”

Frank turned to Riley. “Speaking of which,” he said. “What’s with your bow?” He gestured to the weapon Riley held in her hands. It was shaped like a recurve bow, except that the arms were made of twisting brown lengths of wood and green vines were woven into the material. The bow’s most striking feature was the crimson crystalline roses set at the top and bottom of the grip. The roses glowed a rich red and Jason thought he detected a faint pulse. He couldn’t help but shake the feeling that the bow had a heartbeat.

Riley hesitated before replying quietly, “The bow is called

Bloody Thorn. It has great stats, but I'm a bit confused. The notification says that the special ability is locked. I also received a quest when I picked it up."

She paused a moment, seeming reluctant to continue her explanation. "Apparently, the bow used to be owned by a woman whose family was killed by these cultists. She vowed revenge for their deaths, but died before she was able to accomplish the task." Riley looked up at Jason and Frank, her dark eyes clouded with anger. "The quest is to find the others responsible for her family's murder."

"Uh, and then do what?" Frank asked hesitantly.

Riley looked at him evenly. "And then make certain they never hurt anyone again," she said in a menacing tone.

"Okay then," Frank said slowly, his eyes widening. "That's a bit dark, but it sounds like a plan."

Then Frank turned to Jason. "How about you, oh fearless leader? What did you get?"

Jason grinned. "The gem was a quest item. The armor… well, like you said, it might be easier to show you."

With a thought, Jason activated *Bone Armor*. A cultist on the ledge above them exploded in a shower of flesh and congealed blood. Its bones then darted toward Jason, melding into three discs of bones that were each approximately two feet in diameter. The bone shields floated around him in a lazy circle. Testing the spell, Jason discovered that he could change the position of the discs with a thought, forming a three-panel wall of bone in front of him if he needed to.

Frank looked at the bone shields and then back at his frost-covered axe. "Yours might be cooler," he said with a chuckle.

"I don't know about that, but maybe I won't have to hide in a corner during every fight," Jason said with a laugh of his own.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Riley said grimly. "I seem to remember you sitting up on your safe little ledge during most of that fight." A weak grin curled her lips at this last part.

"Always undervaluing my efforts," Jason grumbled.

Their discussion was interrupted as a frantic, high-pitched voice filled the cavern. "Pretty lady!"

A dark gray form darted through the air, streaking toward Riley. Pint stopped a few inches from her face, his wings fluttering as he waved his pitchfork excitedly. "I here! I defend you. Where are baddies?" The imp looked around the cave, searching for enemies to defeat.

Riley's face scrunched in confusion. "Um hi, Pint," she said tentatively. "There are no more enemies. Why are you here?"

Jason could feel a sense of dread curl in his stomach. There could only be one reason why the imp was here, and he expected

Frank and Riley weren't going to like it.

"Bony man sent me!" Pint exclaimed. Then he scratched his head in confusion. "He ask me give message. Can't remember…" The imp rapped his head with his knuckles as he tried to recall what he was supposed to tell them.

Then Pint's eyes rested on Jason and a lightbulb seemed to go off in his head. "Ahh! I tell meany pants that baddies coming!"

"What do you mean 'baddies' are coming?" Riley asked slowly.

Pint smiled at her gleefully. "Special plan! Traveler baddies coming in two days!" He held up a hand showing three digits.

Jason could feel his dread convert to full-blown panic as Frank and Riley both looked at him with confused expressions. Then Frank said darkly, "What does he mean enemy travelers are coming? What plan?"

"Um…" Jason replied tentatively, his eyes on the floor. "So, mining the dungeon for corpses might have been my Plan B."

"Plan B?" Riley questioned. "What was Plan A?" Jason could see the anger starting to well in her eyes, this time directed at him. He remembered briefly how she had treated Bert and the other cultists and gulped.

Jason glanced at Alfred for help as he struggled to come up with an explanation. He received an impassive stare in return. The cat's expression practically shouted, "I told you so."

Then Jason answered hesitantly, "Plan A was to lure an army of players here. Before we entered, I sent out an anonymous message explaining that I'd been sighted near this dungeon. I also set the dungeon to 'public' so that the other players could enter."

"What the hell was the point of that?" Frank sputtered. "We beat a dungeon just so we can have an army of players trap us in here and kill us over and over?"

"No," Jason said shortly. "The dungeon is a trap. The plan is to lure the players inside and then ambush them with the Twilight Throne forces waiting outside. If the players die here, they respawn every forty-five minutes. I could summon a sizable army in a few hours instead of a few weeks." He gazed at them evenly. "We just have to keep killing them and summoning the bodies."

Frank and Riley looked back at him with wide eyes. "I just… I don't even know what to say to that," Frank said. "You want to spawn camp a bunch of players and butcher them a couple dozen times?"

"That's exactly what he's trying to say," Riley said, anger in her voice. "But the real question is, why the hell didn't he tell us what we were coming here to do."

"I was worried, okay?" Jason replied, his own anger rising. "It's only a matter of time before another group of players attacks the

Twilight Throne. If we can't increase the city's population quickly, it will fall in the next war. I can't count on everyone being as arrogant as Alex.

"It's more than that, though. I *need* to protect the city – I *need* this game. I depend on the money from my streaming contract. What will the company do if I lose the Twilight Throne?"

"We would have helped you if you had asked. You just thought we would screw it up," Frank muttered. "That's the same reason you've been hiding your class abilities. You just think we're a bunch of deadweight that you have to carry along."

"Hey, that's not it at all…" Jason began.

Then Riley interrupted him, "No. He's right. It's all about you. And *you* don't trust us. Pure and simple." She glared at Jason, the bow in her hand beginning to glow a darker red. "You think you can just lie to us and trap us in here to force us to help you? You're no better than Alex. I knew I shouldn't have trusted you." She raised the bow, and black energy began to collect along the tip of her arrow, the missile pointing directly at Jason. Pint edged away from her nervously, watching the exchange with wide eyes.

Jason looked at Riley in shock. Her eyes were dark pools, and her mana expanded around her in waves, the malignant energy blotting out the multicolored glow of the crystals embedded in the ceiling. "I thought you were better than Alex," she said in a dark voice.

Frank rested a hand on Riley's shoulder. "It's not worth it," he said softly. "He'll just respawn. You've got to let go of your mana."

Riley started at Frank's touch. She looked at him in confusion for a moment, the dark aura around her fading slightly. Then she took a deep breath and forcefully released her mana. Without the energy feeding her emotions, Riley's anger began to dissipate. Her shoulders slumped and her hand loosened on the string of her bow. She looked up at Jason with a hurt expression, tears budding in the corners of her eyes. Before he could say anything more, Riley pulled up her system menu, and she abruptly logged off.

Frank's voice broke Jason out of his trance, his eyes still on the space Riley had occupied a moment before. "This isn't cool at all, man," he said, shaking his head. "We aren't NPCs that you can just order around. I thought we were your friends."

Then Frank disappeared.

Jason stood in the cave alone, his thoughts boiling. Guilt and frustration warred in his mind. Could he really have trusted them with this plan? Would they have just gone along with it? Would they have made it this far? Their accusing stares, especially Riley's expression, were still burned into his mind. He closed his eyes, but the image

didn’t go away.

“What we do now?” Pint asked tentatively, hugging his little pitchfork.

“I don’t know, Pint. I don’t know,” Jason answered bleakly.

Chapter 26 - Betrayed

"Sir," a technician said, attempting to get Robert's attention. "There's something happening in Grey Keep. Player and NPC activity has spiked, and an enormous group has collected in the market."

Robert glanced up and his brow furrowed. "Well, then what are you waiting for? Put it up on the big screen," he ordered, gesturing to the screen that hovered over the lab.

In an instant, the display shifted to the feed of a player standing in the market. It showed a makeshift wooden stage constructed on the western part of the square. Alexion's decapitated corpse lay over a wooden block, his blood staining the wood. Regent Strouse stood beside the corpse and addressed the people. Many of the technicians in the lab stopped what they were doing to watch the scene unfolding on the screen.

"This is the result of spreading insurrection and chaos," Strouse said in a booming voice. "We will not tolerate…"

The Regent was interrupted as the clouds that hung above the city parted and a beam of light shot down from the heavens, illuminating Alexion's corpse. The light was so bright that the technicians in the control room covered their eyes. When the light cleared, they saw that Alexion's body had been reformed. He now stood tall, gazing at the townspeople that filled the square.

"Is this who you would follow?" Alexion asked in the hushed silence that had descended upon the market. He gestured at Strouse, whose mouth hung slack after witnessing Alexion's resurrection.

"It is only with the Lady's strength and support that we can weather the darkness that faces us." Alexion turned his golden eyes to Strouse. "The light can be used to heal and support. Yet it can also be used to unleash holy retribution upon those that dare to strike against the Lady and her followers."

Alexion's hands moved through a rapid-fire series of gestures. Golden orbs appeared in the air around him, swiftly growing in number. The orbs were then pulled toward Alexion's body in a swirling vortex. As the orbs struck his skin, they exploded in a flash of light, causing the townsfolk and players to flinch backward. He was now robed in plate armor composed of panels of golden light. In his hand, Alexion held a radiant broadsword aloft, luminescent flames licking along the length of the blade.

"No longer shall the Lady's followers back down to the weak and the corrupt. We will fight – for we are warriors of light." Alexion leveled his blade at Strouse. "And you will be the first to feel our wrath."

Without another word, Alexion sped forward. His blade darted through the air and crashed against Strouse's hastily drawn blade with a clash of metal. Strouse regained his footing and grinned mockingly. "More flash and sizzle from a charlatan. You think you can take me, boy?"

Alexion's impassive eyes stared back. "I only need my faith in the Lady," he answered, his tone calm and confident. Then his blade lanced forward and the pair engaged in a frantic exchange of blows.

A cry rang out from the back of the crowd, and the player's camera whirled. Men and women standing in the crowd threw off their cloaks, revealing mail and plate armor. Bolts of magic and arrows streaked through the air, slamming into the bodies of the guards on the stage and ringing the square. The crowd in the market began to panic as the unarmed townsfolk fled towards the streets in an attempt to escape the unfolding battle.

"Oh shit," the player said weakly. His hands began darting through a spell, and a protective sheet of ice sprang up around him. Unfortunately, the icy shield made the player an obvious target. A ball of flame immediately hit the sphere, melting through the player's protection. His hands darted through another spell, but he never got it off.

A blur streaked through the air, and the camera jolted as something struck the player. He looked down, seeing the shaft of an arrow embedded in his throat. The player's hand reached for his neck feebly. As he toppled to the ground, the camera tilted sideways and continued to stream the fight being waged on stage. The city guards fell under a barrage of spells and arrows as Alexion danced with the Regent in a whirlwind of steel.

Alexion abruptly let his guard down, Strouse's blade shattering his golden breastplate and penetrating his chest with a sickening thud. "See, boy, it takes more than fancy words to lead a city," the Regent sneered, twisting the blade.

Alexion coughed violently, blood splattering his golden blade and causing small wisps of smoke to lift into the air. His dead eyes looked back at Strouse. "You're right. It also takes unwavering conviction."

Then Alexion grabbed the Regent's blade in one hand, locking it in place. His other arm lashed forward with his broadsword. The golden blade stabbed through Strouse's chest, penetrating his heart. The Regent tumbled to the stage, a look of shock on his face. Alexion grunted as he jerked the man's blade from his abdomen, and, with a hasty spell, the wound in his stomach began to close.

Strouse gasped on the ground, his health finally depleting. The last sight he saw before he died was Alexion's golden blade raised into the air above him, fresh blood sizzling along the length of the blade. Then the player in the crowd died, and the screen faded to black.

Not a whisper could be heard in the control room as the technicians stared at the dark screen. Robert looked at the tech near him. "Get the

Vermillion Live producer on the line. We have some footage they're going to be interested in."

* * *

The next morning, Jason woke to sun streaming in his window. Groaning, he pulled himself into a sitting position. His thoughts immediately returned to the evening before and his confrontation with Frank and Riley. Exhausted when he logged off, he had decided it was time for some sleep. It hadn't come easily. He had spent the night tossing and turning, his friends' accusing eyes haunting his subconscious.

"Why the hell did they get so upset?" Jason asked quietly.

He could understand that they would be confused or irritated with him, but both of his friends had been incredibly angry. It was a more violent reaction than he had been expecting – Riley had nearly shot him.

Jason rose and stumbled toward the kitchen to make himself some breakfast. As he poured some cereal into a bowl, he heard movement on the other side of the small house. Angie emerged a moment later rubbing at her eyes. She still looked exhausted. His aunt slumped onto one of the stools at the kitchen counter.

"Late night?" Jason asked. He grabbed a cup and set it on the coffee maker for her.

"We're working against a hard deadline to get this latest product out the door," she growled in response. "They have me working 16-hour shifts until the work gets done. That includes coming in over the weekend."

Angie sighed. "There's a strong possibility that I might either be home late or may not come back at all over the next few days. Maybe I can sleep under my desk…"

"Ugh, that sucks," Jason said, handing her the now-full cup of coffee. She accepted it gratefully and took a long sip of the molten liquid. Glancing up at Jason, Angie noted his haggard expression for the first time.

"What's the deal with you? You look like you ate a bunch of sour grapes," she said with a grin.

Jason shook his head. "It's a long story, but the short version is that I pissed off two of my friends last night in-game."

Angie frowned. "How did you manage that?"

"Well, I came up with a plan to lure other players to a dungeon we were running. The idea was that once I baited the players to enter

the dungeon, I could ambush them with my city's army and then kill them over and over." Jason could see that Angie wasn't understanding. "That way I can summon new undead for my city. I could add a couple thousand new troops in a day in-game instead of weeks."

Angie's eyes widened. "Apart from how screwed-up that sounds, I'm not sure I see the problem."

Jason rubbed at his temple, his eyes closed. "The problem is that I didn't tell Riley or Frank what I was planning. They just thought we were running a dungeon."

"Ahh, that makes more sense. I guess this all came to a head last night, huh?" Angie asked.

"Basically," Jason grumbled. "I just don't understand why they were so upset. I guess I should have told them my plan, but it's not like anything terrible came of it."

Angie hesitated before speaking, her eyes clouded as she gazed at the kitchen counter in front of her. "Trust is a tricky thing," she began. "I usually don't talk about it, but I used to be married once." Angie gestured around the small house with a wry smile. "As you can see, it didn't exactly work out."

Jason noticed that Angie appeared deep in thought, a pained expression on her face. He had always wondered about his aunt's last name, but he had never asked. He could tell that this story wasn't something she was fond of retelling and he quickly decided to keep his mouth shut.

Angie took a sip of her coffee and sighed. "I thought Chris and I were happy. We had a lot in common. We went on trips together. We would sit up at night watching TV and make fun of the actors. We did all that happy married stuff you always hear about. I even thought we would end up having kids." Angie shook her head, her eyes on the cup cradled in her hands.

"I never expected that Chris would cheat on me," she said bluntly, anger tinging her voice. "It took me years to figure it out. I would probably never have noticed what was going on if I hadn't stumbled upon the two of them."

Angie closed her eyes. "The cheating and the divorce were bad enough, but it's the part that came after that really hit me hard." Angie glanced up at Jason, her eyes hard as she recalled these painful memories. "When someone hurts you like that, you don't just heal immediately. It's a breach of trust that makes you question everything and everyone else in your life. It makes you reexamine your friends and family under a microscope."

Angie paused for a long moment. "That's probably why I haven't really dated since then. To be honest, it's probably part of the

reason for my poor relationship with your parents. I just sort of cut myself off from the world. It seemed safer at the time, but I realize now that I was just scared.

"I guess what I'm saying is that trust is difficult. I don't know your friends' situation or what they're going through, but even small betrayals can feel like heavy blows if you're already bruised and bloody," Angie explained quietly. "I'm not sure this helps," she added with a soft chuckle. "It's probably just the prattling of an old woman."

With this last statement, the conversation descended into silence. Angie nursed her coffee as Jason considered what she had said. Maybe she was right. The lie about his plan seemed small, but he hadn't really considered what was going on with Riley or Frank or how they would interpret it. The Old Man's lecture rang in his mind. His friends were people, with their own feelings, desires, and wants. Maybe he hadn't been treating them with the respect they deserved.

Jason's thoughts wandered to the events that had occurred over the last week in-game. The first thing that came to mind was the massacre in Peccavi. What stuck out to him was Riley's conflicted expression when she thought he was simply going to kill them all against their will. Then he remembered their conversation that next day where she had confessed to him that she needed to learn to trust him. She had been hurt by Alex in a way that Jason probably couldn't understand. To her, maybe he was just another guy that had betrayed her trust.

Frank had also seemed off since they began playing. He had been timid and meek in the beginning, sticking to the back of the group. Jason considered their conversation as they were traveling to poison the cultists. He was dealing with his own issues and insecurities. The fact that Jason hadn't told him his plan probably came across as not trusting him or thinking he was too inept to handle the responsibility.

"I messed up," Jason admitted. He looked up at Angie. "Your story definitely helped. I hadn't considered where Frank and Riley were coming from or how they would react to my lie."

Angie gazed at him evenly. "Well, then you should go fix it. Take one more piece of advice from an old woman – you don't want to live with regret."

Jason nodded. "You're right. I need to meet with them today. That's assuming they'll even answer my call."

Resolved, Jason finished his breakfast and then messaged Riley and Frank. He explained that he was sorry and that he wanted to meet with them to apologize. As he finished his morning routine, he received their reluctant replies. He arranged to meet them at the bubble tea shop that Riley had introduced him to. It seemed like a

good place for him to beg for forgiveness.

An hour later, Jason stepped out of a driverless taxi. He looked around, taking in the cracked and crumbling sidewalk and the graffiti that adorned the side of the small shop. He stood there for a long moment, collecting his thoughts.

"Hello, Jason," Riley said from behind him.

Jason turned and found himself looking into Riley's angry brown eyes. A feeling of déjà vu overcame him. It wasn't that long ago that he was standing in front of this same building. The only difference was that the tables were now turned.

"Hi, Riley," Jason said. "Frank must be running late. Do you want to go inside and get something to drink?"

"Sure," she said. She walked past him and into the store without any further discussion.

The pair ordered their drinks in silence and then took a seat at one of the tables on the patio. Jason fiddled with the cup in front of him, not certain how to begin. Then he took a deep breath and jumped into it. "I want to apologize. I shouldn't have hidden my plan from you and Frank."

Riley didn't respond right away, so Jason kept going. "I get that you've been through a lot with Alex. I want to be a person you can trust – not another guy that's going to lie to you and hurt you just to manipulate you into doing what I want."

Jason shook his head, his eyes on his hands. "I'm not even sure why I hid my plan from you. My reasons seem flimsy now. You and Frank have been nothing but awesome and supportive. I also know you went out of your way to fix things with my parents and at Richmond. I guess I'm dealing with my own trust issues," he said softly.

"But you deserved better from me," Jason added.

Riley met this torrent of words with silence. "I do," she finally said. Jason glanced up at her and saw that the anger in her eyes had faded slightly, replaced by a lingering pain.

"You screwed up. You should have told me what you were planning to do," she said bluntly. Then she hesitated for a moment, her hand clenching around her cup. "But some of my anger might be because of Alex. It just reminds me of what he did to me…"

Riley's eyes dropped to the table, shaking her head slightly. "That's probably why I hate the cultists so much. They enslaved all those townspeople and tortured them. Alex used to look at me like those Masters – like I was some kind of test subject in some sick experiment. That's probably why I have just been giving myself over to my dark mana. It makes it easier to act without thinking about all that baggage. The sense of freedom is intoxicating."

Jason nodded. “I can definitely understand that. I did the same thing when I first started playing. I ended up slaughtering an entire city full of people, after all,” he added with a dry chuckle.

Riley looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “I just haven’t gotten over it. I keep looking for reasons not to trust the people around me, wondering if they are going to screw me over. I just…” Riley trailed off, uncertain how to continue.

Without thinking, Jason reached forward and took Riley’s hand in his own. “Hey, I understand. He was an asshole. He screwed me too. In some ways, I’m an even bigger asshole for lying to you. Especially since I already knew what you were going through. I promise you, I won’t lie to you again.”

Riley took a deep breath. She glanced at Jason’s hand but didn’t pull away. “I’m sorry I get all weepy every time we come here,” she said with a chuckle.

“Hey, it’s okay, but I stand by what I said the first time. You’re not the cutest crier,” he said, handing her a napkin.

Riley glared at him. “Watch it. You’re still on thin ice, and I’m pretty sure I could take you out in-game.”

“Isn’t this cute,” a voice said from beside them. They both turned to find Frank walking through the doorway leading out onto the patio.

“I was prepared to start yelling at you, but that was kind of touching,” he said with a grin. Riley blushed and pulled her hand away from Jason’s, dabbing at her eyes with the napkin.

“Hi, Frank,” Jason said. He stood and greeted his friend. “I just want to…”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. You’re sorry,” he interrupted. He then punched Jason in the shoulder. Hard. Jason staggered sideways from the force of the blow.

“Damn it,” Jason hissed, feeling his arm go numb. He looked back at Frank, who was taking a seat at the table. “I suppose I deserved that.”

“You did,” Frank said shortly. “You were a huge dick.”

Jason took his seat, his eyes on his large friend. He hadn’t noticed it at first, but Frank was looking more toned. A lot of the flab had disappeared, and Jason could make out muscle definition in his arms and torso. He remembered thinking the same thing when he looked in the mirror a few days ago but had forgotten to ask Alfred about it. Maybe they were due for another heart-to-heart conversation. Assuming, of course, that he could find time with the impending battle approaching.

As though reading his mind, Frank rubbed his hands together. “I guess the question now is, how are we going to take on this player

army. I couldn't find anything online about the group traveling to the dungeon. That must mean that they are smarter than Alex."

"That's a low bar," Riley said sourly.

"So, this means you guys are going to help me?" Jason asked, still rubbing his arm.

"Well, yeah," Frank said. "At a minimum, we're trapped in that damn dungeon with you. However, I'd also like to test out my new equipment," he added with a grin.

Riley looked at Jason levelly. "To be clear, I still think you're a jerk, but we need to save the dead villagers we left in the ruined city. Besides, we're a team. A dysfunctional one maybe, but still a team."

"Also, I kind of like tapping into my evil side," Frank said, glancing at Riley. "I can't wait to see the looks on those players' faces when they run into us."

Jason stared at his friends in surprise. "I don't know what to say. Thanks for giving me another chance. I promise to tell you guys my plans from now on."

Frank waved a hand. "Good. I'd hate to have to show you who's really carrying our team," he said in his best attempt at a menacing voice. When they both just stared at him with a deadpan expression, he pushed forward. "Anyway, now that we've gotten that stuff out of the way, let's talk about tactics!"

Jason grinned, planning was always his favorite part. "Okay, after you guys left, Pint explained that there were at least a hundred players in the group approaching the dungeon. If we log back in today, we'll have a few hours until they show up. I ordered Rex to station our troops in the lake near the entrance to the dungeon. That way they won't be discovered and will be in position to flank the players. I guess we're going to find out if the undead need to breathe."

"What about the people in Peccavi?" Riley asked, concern in her voice. "Won't the players just destroy the town on their way up to the dungeon?"

Jason nodded. "I had a similar concern. When I originally sent the note back with Pint, I ordered Rex to evacuate the town and move the townspeople back into the forest. He assigned some troops to defend them. I doubt William is happy about it but better safe than sorry. We can move them back once the players enter the dungeon."

"Then that leaves one question; how are we going to tackle the players?" Frank asked, rubbing at his chin.

Riley's eyes flashed with anger. "That's easy. We're going to make them regret messing with us. This is the second time that players have tried hunting us for that stupid real-world bounty. We need to make an example of this group."

Frank stared at her for a moment before lifting his drink.

“Cheers to that!”

Jason watched his friends. The Old Man’s words were beginning to make sense. They were a team, and he needed to learn to trust them. Raising his own drink, Jason joined the toast. Together, he expected that the three of them would make the digital world tremble in fear.

Chapter 27 - Crafty

The technicians in the control room were riveted on the screen hovering over the lab. The display had been broken into several different perspectives, showing the viewpoints of players around Grey Keep. The city was in complete chaos. NPCs and players were engaged in skirmishes throughout the city, many of the buildings were ablaze, and the bodies of the city's residents littered the streets.

Many of the monitoring programs had relayed elevated stress levels for the players engaged in the conflict in Grey Keep. Normally, that would have signaled the need for a game master, but Cerillion Entertainment couldn't afford to let the CPSC intervene in a city-wide conflict. With their past conduct, it was likely that they would raze the whole city. Robert had been forced to call George to get him to hold off the game masters.

"I haven't seen an in-game war on this scale since Jason's attack on Lux," Claire said, her eyes focused on the screen.

"I know. We're likely witnessing the fall of another city," Robert replied distractedly.

His attention was focused on a scene playing out on one of the windows on the large screen. "Focus on that bottom right-hand player," Robert ordered. The image soon filled the screen.

The player was standing in front of the keep. A quick glance at the player ID showed that they were viewing Alexion's player camera. A tech glanced up at Robert. "Alexion has a full video suite installed. We can show a third-person perspective," he explained.

"Well, then do it," Robert said impatiently.

The screen zoomed out to show the area around the keep. Alexion stood in front of the stone structure. Yet he didn't try to siege its walls. Instead, he faced the courtyard of the keep. Troops dressed in the livery of the various noble houses and peasants armed with makeshift weapons filled the enclosure.

"People of Grey Keep," Alexion addressed the crowd. Golden light radiated from him in waves, and he held his glowing yellow sword aloft, its flames lapping at the air. "Today, Grey Keep has been purged of its corruption. Regent Strouse and his soldiers are dead. We have claimed this city for the Lady."

He took a deep breath and then continued. "No longer will Grey Keep be ruled by selfish bureaucrats that use its people and its troops for their own ends. It will be governed by the Lady and her vassals. This city shall feel the light's touch, and it shall flourish!"

At this last statement, the crowd let out a triumphant roar into the

sky. The Lady answered. The clouds over the city parted, and beams of light shot down toward Grey Keep. The rays illuminated the buildings and people, motes of golden energy swirling within the columns of light. Without warning, the earth beneath the crowd's feet began to tremble and jerk. Then the Roman-themed structures began to change.

The keep buckled and shook as the heavy stone blocks that made up its walls turned into semi-transparent crystal. Towering spires shot from the roof of the keep, rocketing up into the air. Concentric golden rings could be seen hovering around the peaks of each tower.

The buildings were not spared, their plaster walls turning to a brilliant mix of glass-like crystal and gold. Similarly, the walls ringing the city changed to a milky-white crystal, the edges of the walls forming a jagged, erratic pattern. The light struck the surface of the transformed buildings and refracted in a kaleidoscope of color, bathing the city in a rainbow of light.

The residents of the city also underwent dramatic changes. Many of the guardsmen sprouted golden wings, and their mail and plate armor were replaced with glowing yellow bands of energy. The townsfolk experienced a subtler transformation. Their clothes shifted to an incandescent white, while glimmering halos appeared above their heads.

"Holy shit," a technician whispered softly.

As Robert scowled at Alexion's glowing form, he muttered, "That's not too far off the mark." Robert hadn't missed the fact that the dead and dying were unaffected by the changes. Corpses now littered the beatific streets of the transformed city, their blood staining the white pavestones red.

A universal system message was broadcast to every player logged into the game. It explained that Grey Keep had been converted to the light, granting players the opportunity to start as a Nephilim. In contrast to the Twilight Throne, the city was bathed in perpetual light, granting a stat bonus to NPCs and players with a positive alignment and a penalty to those with a negative alignment.

"The Crystal Reach," Claire said dryly. "What a jovial name for a city – especially one created from such bloodshed."

As Robert watched Alexion's impassive, almost bored expression, he couldn't help but wonder if the name was meant to be ironic.

* * *

An hour after their conversation in the café, Jason sat on a rock in the Hydra's den. Frank was leaning against a nearby wall, while Riley paced in front of them. Jason had seen the notification regarding

the fall of Grey Keep, though he wasn't entirely surprised. When he saw Alexion's name, a few pieces began to click into place, particularly the desecration that had been pinned on him.

Unfortunately, Jason had bigger problems at the moment. After only a few minutes of discussion, it had immediately become clear that the battle against the players would be challenging.

If Jason's group started from the assumption that the enemy players weren't idiots, then the invading force was going to quickly realize that they faced a significant tactical problem. The entire first level of the dungeon was a maze of relatively narrow hallways. This meant that the players likely wouldn't assault the dungeon *en masse*. If they were intelligent, they would send smaller scouting parties ahead to map the maze before moving their troops into the dungeon.

At first, this seemed like this offered an opportunity for Jason and his group to whittle down the enemy numbers by taking out their scouts. Yet that wasn't going to be a straightforward process. Any players that died in the maze would simply respawn at the entrance in forty-five minutes. This meant that they couldn't permanently reduce the size of the enemy army if they killed someone inside the dungeon.

On the other hand, attacking the players while they were outside the dungeon wasn't an option either. If they killed a player in that situation, he or she would respawn at whatever city their spawn point was bound to, meaning that Jason and his group couldn't kill them repeatedly to summon new NPCs for the Twilight Throne.

"I want to state for the record that this was a stupid plan," Frank grumbled from where he leaned against the rock wall of the cave.

"He's right," Riley added as she walked back and forth in front of the pair. "We basically need to draw the enemy players into the dungeon and then kill them. However, we don't know how many players we're facing, and our NPC troops don't respawn."

She looked at Jason with an irritated expression. "On top of everything else, we have no way to communicate with Rex once the players show up." She put up a hand to forestall Jason. "Let me correct that. We have a way to send commands through your zombies, but no way for Rex to send us a message back."

Jason grinned as he watched his two friends. "That sounds about right."

"Then why do you look so damned happy?" Frank asked in irritation.

"It's a challenge, isn't it?" Jason asked. "Plus, I think I have an idea."

That got his friends' attention. They both grimaced slightly, but at least they were listening. "It's clear that we have to allow the

enemy army to map the first level or they won't enter the dungeon as a group. We also can't wait too long, or the creatures in the dungeon will respawn. Looking at the system clock, we only have a couple in-game days left."

Jason raised a finger. "But, we can still whittle down their forces to some degree. Killing the players doesn't do much since they respawn, but we can take their bodies and their gear. The players probably have backup equipment, but this should weaken them and add more creatures to our army."

"And how exactly do you propose to ambush the players?" Riley asked.

At that moment, the shuffling of feet and the creak of wood could be heard in the tunnel above them. Jason hopped up from the rock he was sitting on, his grin widening. "One second and you'll see. I think those are my materials arriving."

Jason jogged up the tunnel leading into the ruined city. As he exited the narrow passage, he saw his remaining zombies and skeletons driving a wagon up to the entrance of the Hydra's den. Heaped in the back of the wagons were the remaining bodies and bones of the cultists. Their limbs and severed parts had been dumped unceremoniously in the back of each wagon. He could see a trail of blood leading down the street from the direction they had come.

Unperturbed by the grotesque sight, Jason quickly ordered his minions to begin carrying the materials down into the Hydra's den. He had decided to use the cave as his staging area for summoning. It was off the beaten path, and he should be able to safely summon from this location without being discovered by the enemy players. The narrow tunnel also offered a good choke point if he ended up having to fight from this location.

As he led his heavily laden minions back into the cave, Jason saw his friends' eyes widen. His undead began tossing the corpses and remains over the edge of the ledge overhanging the cave as Jason made his way down to the cave floor. A broad smile crept across his face and his eyes danced with excitement. It had been a long time since he had the opportunity to build something interesting. The catapults had worked well, but they were uninspired compared to some of his other creations.

"To answer your last question," Jason began, addressing Riley, "we're going to build something that can ambush the enemy scouts." Seeing her confused expression, he added, "I may not have been entirely forthcoming about my abilities. I can craft nearly any type of skeleton so long as I have the parts."

Frank nodded, gesturing at Riley. "You missed it earlier, but our fearless leader here has some serious mad scientist skills. That's

how we ended up with the skeleton catapults."

"Okay," Riley said slowly. "But what are you going to build?"

Jason's eyes glowed darkly as he summoned his dark mana. "The stuff of nightmares," he replied glibly.

Ignoring Riley's eye roll, Jason approached the swiftly growing pile of corpses and bones. His hands darted through the motion of his *Custom Skeleton* spell. Dark energy swirled around his hands and lashed at the air around him. The world soon slowed, and Jason glanced back, noting that Riley's mouth was opening ever so slowly. Likely she intended to tell him he was an idiot. With a chuckle, Jason got to work.

On the way home after his meeting with Frank and Riley in the real world, Jason had plenty of time to brainstorm ideas for his new minions. He needed something stealthy, similar to his Night Children. Unfortunately, he lacked the child-sized bones to make those fearsome gray creatures. That meant he needed to create something new.

Then he had considered the hallways of the maze. The walls were covered in thick, faintly glowing vines and the vegetation had spread to overhang each hall. He decided that he needed to create something that could travel above the ground floor of the maze and ambush the players from above.

Jason began pulling together bones, forming the shape of his new creation in the air in front of him. He decided that the creature didn't need traditional feet. Instead, he could create something like a spider that could easily scale the vines on the first floor. He attached six arms to a human ribcage, connecting five-fingered hands to each limb. Then he lengthened the fingers of the forelegs into dagger-like blades. He also added bone plating to the creature's back and underbelly to provide some protection.

As he surveyed his new creation, Jason decided that it needed a better weapon. The creature could easily climb the vines, but its claw-like forelimbs weren't a very effective way to attack players. After an initial strike, the creatures would be relatively easy to kill. His thoughts flitted through his available materials. Then he caught sight of the pools of acidic green blood that had formed in the floor of the Hydra's den.

"I wonder…" Jason muttered.

With a thought, he maneuvered a bone over the pool and gently dipped the tip into the acid. As he did so, Jason thought the word "combine." Miraculously, the bone began to absorb some of the green liquid, turning it a dark green.

"Ha!" Jason exclaimed. "I guess this is what my Intermediate *Bone Crafting* skill lets me do now."

Jason then dipped his new creature's claws into the acid, dying

the bleached bone a sickly green. He expected that this would give the creature a poisoned weapon and provide a slight edge after its initial strike against a player. As he was going through the process of imbuing the creature's bones with acid, a strange thought crossed Jason's mind. Poisoned weapons were all well and good, but what if he could make his new creatures even more dangerous? For example, what if it could spit acid? That would let it blind an opponent and strike from the vines overhanging the hallways.

He could see how the concept would work in theory. The skeleton spiders didn't have any organs, and so the human ribcage was hollow in the middle. If Jason created a sack of dark mana in their torsos like he had done with the container he had created before, he could have the spiderlike creatures suck up the liquid and store it in their chest cavity. He knew that the dark mana sometimes acted like a muscle, so theoretically they might be able to "flex" the dark mana and shoot a stream of acid. They would eventually run out of ammunition, but it might give a way for them to attack before dropping on a group of players.

Jason turned back to his fledgling creation, a manic grin plastered on his face. "We're going to make you into something terrifying," he whispered.

Nearly an hour later, Jason had managed to create a working prototype. He surveyed his new creation as it hung in the air before him. It was unsettling to look at. The creature had a human head attached to a ribcage. Inside its torso was a throbbing mass of dark mana. It also had six arm-like legs, and its front "legs" had six-inch poisoned blades for fingers.

"Now it needs a name," Jason said to himself. "How about Venom Spitter?"

"It is not a terrible name," Alfred replied from beside him. Jason jumped slightly. It was odd to hear someone speak to him while using the *Custom Skeleton* spell. The cat had sat quietly next to Jason while he crafted his new minion, carefully surveying his work.

"Thanks for the support," Jason said dryly.

Alfred let out something that sounded remarkably like a snort. Then he glanced at Frank and Riley, who had slowly moved across the cave during the last hour. "I see that you have reconciled with these two players." He shifted his gaze back to Jason, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I explained my ulterior motive in coming here and apologized for keeping it from them," Jason said in response to Alfred's unasked question. "And you were right. I should have just leveled with them from the beginning."

Alfred nodded his feline head, a look of satisfaction in his eyes. "I am becoming more accustomed to analyzing the players'

interpersonal relationships. The accuracy of my conclusions has increased 27.54% since we began interacting."

"Good to know that I'm useful," Jason said with a laugh.

Then his brow furrowed. There was a question he had been meaning to ask Alfred, and this might be his last opportunity before the battle. "By the way, I've noticed that my real-world body has put on some muscle recently. I observed the same changes with Frank. Is this something you're doing? I mean, I certainly haven't started exercising more."

Alfred glanced to the side. "Your deduction is correct. I have been using the VR hardware to stimulate real-world muscle activity while the players are inside the game world. This increases cardiovascular and muscular fitness."

Jason looked at the cat in confusion. "What's the point?" he asked.

"That should be obvious," Alfred replied bluntly, a note of frustration in his voice. "If you enter this world for long periods of time, your organic muscles will atrophy. In the long run, this would reduce your physical health and decrease your time within the game world. By improving the condition of the players' bodies, I can increase player uptime."

"But…" Jason began, hesitating for a moment as he collected his thoughts. "Aren't you basically saying that you can control our bodies? I mean, if you can stimulate our muscles, what's to stop you from taking control completely?"

Alfred tilted his head slightly as though he was pondering that idea. "I do not currently see any advantage to controlling your real-world bodies. My ability to 'take control' of a player's body is also limited by the hardware that they use. I can manage small muscle twitches, but controlling a player's entire body would be much more complicated. Even if the hardware were sufficient, there would be other limitations such as access to a power supply."

The cat's response allayed some of Jason's concerns. There were practical limitations to the AI's control of the players' bodies, and it wasn't like he could create an army of zombie players in the near future. In fact, Jason could see some perks associated with effectively exercising without doing any work himself. He expected that some people would pay money just for that side effect of the game.

"I guess that makes sense," Jason said. Then his gaze shifted back to the control interface in front of him and the menacing creature that loomed in the air before him. "I probably need to stop stalling and finish this thing. I'm looking forward to seeing the look on Riley's and Frank's faces."

Alfred just shook his head, letting out a long-suffering sigh.

Jason ignored the judgmental AI and hit the completion button on the design interface. The world swiftly resolved back into motion. Jason stumbled slightly and reached a hand to his head, massaging his aching temple. The spell always took a lot out of him. Then he turned and found that Riley and Frank had moved to one side of the room and were huddled against the wall of the cave.

"Why are you guys way over there?" Jason asked in a confused voice.

"Why? Because you just stood there for like 15 minutes while bones whipped through the air at lightning speed," Riley replied in an angry voice.

Jason's eyes widened. He hadn't considered what the spell would look like to other people. "Huh, well I'm sorry. But do you guys want to see what I've made?"

The pair approached cautiously. Then Jason's Venom Spitter scampered out from behind him. Frank visibly flinched, backing away. Riley's face went pale and she grabbed for her bow.

"What the hell is that thing?" Frank asked in a strangled voice.

"It's a Venom Spitter," Jason replied candidly. "Here, watch."

He ordered the spider to approach a pool of acid. The creature scurried up to the green liquid and then pushed its mouth into the pool, sucking the acid into a sack of dark mana that hovered inside its ribcage. The acid damaged the skeleton's mouth, partially melting the bone. Jason had reduced the minor damage by reinforcing its teeth with dark mana. Once its chest cavity was full, it retreated from the pool and looked at Jason, awaiting further orders.

"Shoot that rock," Jason said, gesturing to a large stone nearly twenty feet from the creature.

The spider heaved violently, and a narrow stream of acid shot forward in an arc. The green liquid sprayed the rock, burning pockmarks into the stone surface and throwing up faint smoke into the air.

"You weren't kidding," Frank said, his eyes wide. "That is definitely the stuff of nightmares." He glanced at Jason. "Remind me never to screw with you."

Riley looked at the creature appraisingly. "So how many of these things can you make?"

Jason frowned. "A decent number, but my Control Limit is starting to get in the way. To be honest, I have about 160 stat points to distribute. I just wasn't certain what to do with them…" He trailed off.

"Then use them!" Frank exclaimed. "I know I'm one to talk, but we're going to need to be at the top of our game from here on out."

Jason sighed. Frank was right. He had been hesitating since he wasn't certain what the Old Man's quest would entail. However, he needed more minions for this coming battle. He knew that his small group would have to handle most of the work. Rex would need to keep most of his forces at the entrance to make certain the players didn't get away, and he also didn't have a map of the first level. They were basically on their own once the players entered the dungeon.

Steeling himself, Jason dumped all his points into *Willpower*. His mana promptly shot up to nearly 8,000, and he saw that he could now summon up to 88 zombies or skeletons. The max level on his skeletons had also increased to level 146. Honestly, he was probably going to need every single summon to pull off the upcoming battles.

"Okay," Jason began. "That should help a lot."

He glanced back at the pile of corpses that was swiftly increasing as his zombies unloaded the remaining bodies and bones. "With these materials, I can probably swing twenty of the Venom Spitters."

Frank sputtered, "Twenty? Jesus, that is going to be terrifying."

"It better be," Riley replied.

Their conversation was interrupted by Pint flying into the cave, his wings beating frantically. "Baddies are here!" the imp screamed as he dove toward Riley. He crawled into her hood and hid himself.

"Speak of the devil," Jason said. Pint had been playing lookout near the entrance to the dungeon, with orders to let them know when the player army arrived. Jason could feel his heart race as he considered the upcoming conflict. They had developed a strategy for whittling down the enemies' strength, but they would eventually need to come up with a plan to attack the army head on.

To relieve his growing tension, Jason channeled his dark mana more forcefully. He could feel the energy pulse and throb through his veins, his eyes glowing with unholy light and his anxiety washed away on a river of frigid power. He looked at his two friends and saw a similar mixture of anxiety and excitement on their faces.

"Let's go make them regret fucking with us," Jason said darkly.

Chapter 28 - Aggravated

The control room was chaotic. Ever since the founding of the Crystal Reach, the technicians had been focused on providing footage of the mutiny and the resulting transformation to the production department. The story of Alexion's martyrdom and rise to power was being broadcast on every gaming news station in the world. Yet Vermillion Live had the best coverage, a product of its exclusive access to Alexion's camera footage.

Claire had taken point in reviewing the video and cutting it for production. She was currently staring at her screen in confusion. She turned to Robert, who sat behind her. "Most of the footage is saved on his headset, but there are holes in the timeline. It looks like some of the video has been deleted."

Robert grunted distractedly. "It's possible he just turned off his camera or deleted the footage himself. There were probably some parts he didn't want others to see."

"I'm not certain…" Claire trailed off. She had seen footage deleted before. Most notably when Jason conquered Lux. She was noticing a similar pattern in Alexion's gameplay video. It appeared that his camera had been on almost constantly, but there were large periods of time that were missing over the last few days. Was Alfred responsible? Maybe she had found a way to prove his involvement.

Claire's thoughts were interrupted by one of the technicians. "Ma'am," the technician said gently, standing over her shoulder.

Claire turned and saw the concerned look on the young man's face. "What's wrong?" she asked. She couldn't imagine what else could have happened to add to their current workload.

"You asked me to report any large player or NPC activity in-game; it appears that a sizable number of players have collected in an isolated location in the game world. From what I can tell, they have gathered at the entrance to a dungeon. Not only that, but we've received a few reports from the players alleging that the dungeon is… malfunctioning."

Robert perked his head up, having overheard their conversation. "Malfunctioning, huh? That seems unlikely. Can you provide video of the location?"

"Yes sir," the tech replied and returned to his seat on the edge of the control room. The screen above the room abruptly changed, now showing the perspective of a player. The player's tag was displayed in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen, indicating that his name was "Paul."

"This is a recording from about an hour ago," the tech explained.

Paul was standing in a dark hallway holding a heavy wooden staff

in one hand. Cracked stone walls towered around him, faintly illuminated by the torches the players carried. Thick, faintly phosphorescent vines hung from the walls and created a dense lattice in the air above the hallway. The other players whispered quietly as they slowly made their way forward.

"I can't believe we're hunting this guy through this empty damned maze," a player beside Paul grumbled. "This place is endless."

Paul shrugged, and the camera bobbed slightly. "The real-money bounty is nothing to sniff at. Besides, who wouldn't want to claim that they took down the ruler of an undead city."

The other player retorted, "I'm not saying it's a bad goal. This is just boring as hell. This maze has been completely cleaned out. I know you saw the traps that had been tripped. He's probably not even here anymore."

"Shut it," one man snapped. "You've all seen the videos of the attack on the Twilight Throne. We should assume he's still here and we have no idea whether he plans to ambush us in this maze." The speaker was an older man in his early forties. He wore thick leather armor and a bandolier of throwing blades hung from his shoulder. "Besides, I could have sworn I heard something." The man looked up into the vines that hung above the hallway, unable to see in the murky light.

"Probably just a spider," Paul muttered.

Without warning, a stream of green acid shot down into the man's face. He let out a tortured scream as his skin bubbled and the substance ate into his eyes. Then he dropped to the ground, his hands rubbing desperately at his face. The players reacted immediately, moving to form a close circle as their healer tried to assist the injured man.

Yet their reaction was too slow. Multiple streams of the caustic green substance shot down from the ceiling, striking exposed faces and heads. Soon more screams filled the air, echoing along the long stone hallway. Paul dove forward, avoiding most of the acid that was sprayed on his teammates. Only small droplets splattered his robes, quickly eating through the fabric.

"They're in the vines," Paul yelled. Seeing that his teammates couldn't react to the threat, he began summoning his mana. Flames wrapped around the head of his staff and formed a thick ball of energy. Then the ball shot forward, striking the glowing vegetation overhead and exploding in a torrent of flame.

The fire spread through the thick covering of vines, outlining the flickering silhouettes of the creatures that were poised above them. The creatures abandoned their hiding place, falling upon the group and their dagger-like claws penetrated both armor and flesh. The camera tilted erratically as Paul tried to catch a clear view of what was attacking them.

He glanced to his right and saw a creature poised over the thrashing form of one of his teammates, green acid eating into the player's throat and

face. The monster shifted awkwardly on its six legs, while its dagger-like forelegs ripped into the player's stomach. Blood and entrails seeped from the open wounds. As the man finally fell limp, the creature turned its grotesque skeletal head toward Paul, green liquid dripping from its mouth and running down its chin.

"Oh shit," Paul exclaimed.

He scrambled away from the creature, beginning a new spell with his free hand. Yet before he could finish, the creature's midsection heaved and a jet of green acid flew toward him. The substance coated Paul's face, the camera view partially blotted out as Paul screamed in pain. Then the creature's claws descended upon him, tearing at his flesh. Where the blades struck, an insidious poison entered his bloodstream and quickly spread throughout his body. Pain wracked him, and Paul screamed again. Then the screen went dark.

"What the hell was that thing?" Claire asked, glancing at the tech.

"I have no idea," the tech murmured. "It's not a monster registered in our database. My guess is that it must be created by a player. Here's what happened after Paul respawned."

The screen changed and now showed the player standing at the entrance to the dungeon. The camera panned down, showing that he was clothed only in a loose cloth shirt and trousers. His robes and staff were gone.

"God damn it," Paul muttered. "Where's my gear?"

The camera panned to the side as Paul looked around. Multicolored tears formed in the air and his other teammates began popping into existence as they respawned. They were clothed similarly to Paul, wearing nothing but their starting gear. They each let out their own exclamations as they noticed their equipment was gone.

"What happened?" a voice asked from behind Paul.

He whirled around and discovered he was being addressed by a young girl who couldn't be more than fourteen years old. Her light-blue eyes glowered at him with an impatient expression. Over the girl's shoulder, the camera also took in the army of players that stood behind her. Makeshift crafting areas had been set up on the ruined stone foundations, and racks of equipment stood nearby. Nearly a hundred players were visible in the clearing.

"Hey, Earth to Paul. How did you die? We sent you in to map the dungeon, not lose all your shit." Snickers could be heard from behind the girl as the other players approached the entrance to hear what had happened.

Paul shuddered as he recalled the massacre. "You think we were trying to get ourselves killed? You have no idea what we faced in there!" he said, glaring at the teenager.

In the blink of an eye, the girl was standing directly in front of him,

and the barrel of a pistol was leveled at his face. Paul stared cross-eyed at the barrel for a moment before he focused on the smirking girl.

"You need to pull it together," she said in a serious tone. "Or I'll provide you with a one-way ticket back home."

Paul gulped and then took a deep calming breath. "This is going to be more difficult than we first thought, Lauren. Jason is definitely here, and he's occupying this dungeon. I'm pretty sure he knows we're here."

The girl smiled calmly and holstered her gun. "Good. That'll just make it more interesting." She turned to the other players behind her. "Get this group re-geared and let's send in more scouts. We need to get the maze mapped quickly. Talk to the players that respawned and get a description of what they fought. We're not going to fight blind."

The screen cut to black and Robert was left staring at the dark display. "Okay, so Jason is in that dungeon, and those players are hunting him. This is bound to be entertaining. Where Jason travels, you can be sure chaos is following closely behind." He glanced at the technician. "Keep track of the player army and Jason's activity."

Robert then grinned at Claire. "I think this next part is going to be fun."

* * *

Jason sat on the crude stone throne in the Minotaur King's lair. The Venom Spitters had done an admirable job of slaying the scouts, retrieving their corpses, and separating the gear from their bodies. As a result, two large piles now sat near the middle of the room – one a pile of corpses and the other a mountain of weapons and armor. Jason wasn't anxious to dig through the equipment for upgrades. He expected that his new minions would need that gear more than he would.

His fingers drummed the armrest of the throne in a cascade of dull thumps. Meanwhile, Alfred lay on the other armrest, impassively watching Jason as he considered what to do next.

He had a few problems.

The players had gotten wise to his tactic of ambushing them with the Venom Spitters. They were now taking out whole groups of the spiderlike creatures and suffering few losses. It was easy enough for a fire mage to set the vines ablaze every few feet. While this was time-consuming and further reduced the visibility in the maze, it was effective in revealing the nimble creatures.

The other issue was that the players were making incredibly slow progress in mapping the maze. A few hours had passed in-game,

and they were nowhere near the Minotaur King's lair. At this rate, the dungeon was likely to respawn long before they discovered the room and the way down to the second level. If he planned to spawn camp the players, then Jason had a deadline to meet, and he needed to lure the player force into the dungeon more quickly.

It was even worse than that, though. Once the players were inside the dungeon, any player he killed would respawn at the entrance within 45 minutes. That meant he needed to get a message to Rex so that he could hold the exit and create a blockade. The problem there was that Rex was sitting underwater with the rest of his undead forces in the lake outside the dungeon – a lake that was on the other side of a miniature army of players.

Jason figured that if he could lure the players into the dungeon and blockade the entrance, then their leader would be left with a choice. He or she could keep hunting Jason, or they could turn around and fight their way back out. If Jason were in that position, he would choose to keep hunting. It was the easier of the two options. If they took out Jason, it would allow the players to regroup inside the dungeon and mount a full-scale attack on the undead protecting the entrance without being flanked by Jason. Of course, that meant their three-person team would need to take on the player army by themselves.

To sum everything up, Jason needed to get a message to Rex, somehow lure the entire group of enemy players into the dungeon, and then find a way to fight off the army with a group of three people. On top of all that, they needed to somehow take out most of the players within 45 minutes and disarm their bodies or reinforcements would begin to respawn.

"What a pain in the ass," Jason muttered. Yet he couldn't help but smile slightly. He had a crazy plan for dealing with these problems, and this time he had been forced to gamble big. His teammates hadn't been open to his suggestion at first, but, ultimately, they had gone along with it. His harebrained schemes had worked in the past, so what was one more?

It was at this moment that his two friends walked through the entrance to the large circular room. They were flanked by Jason's remaining group of Venom Spitters, who carried the corpses of other players and equipment. As Jason's minions added more bodies and loot to the piles, Frank and Riley approached Jason. Jason could see that Frank was dragging a blindfolded player behind him. The man had been bound and gagged.

"Hello, Jason," Riley said in a casual voice. She winked an obsidian eye and grinned at him. This next part of the plan would require some exceptional acting on the group's part.

I think she's starting to like this too much, Jason thought dryly.

"Remove his blindfold," Jason said in a gruff voice.

Frank hauled the player to his feet and ripped off his blindfold and gag. The man looked around in confusion, his eyes wide and fearful. He glanced at the pile of corpses nearby, blood staining the dirty floor of the room. His face went white. "What… what is this?" he asked.

Then he caught sight of Jason. His dark form was perched on the crude stone throne, his face shrouded in shadow as discs of bone swirled around him in lazy circles. The Venom Spitters deposited their newfound loot and then scuttled over to the throne and perched around it, staring at the man as acid dripped from their ruined mandibles.

Jason's mouth twisted into a cruel grin. "This is where you give us some information, or we make your next death rather unpleasant."

The man's eyes widened, but he kept calm. "I-I'm not telling you anything," he stuttered.

"I was hoping you would say that," Jason replied. "Have you met my friend, Riley? She is quite talented with her blades."

Riley smiled grimly at the bound man, drawing a dagger from her sheath ever-so-slowly. The scrape of metal on leather filled the room, and the man visibly trembled. Riley approached him at a casual pace, carefully inspecting her blade. As she neared the man, she locked eyes with him.

"Are you going to tell us what we want to know, or do I need to make this *personal*?" she asked, as she drew her dagger lightly across the man's cheek. Blood welled along the wound, and the player drew in a sharp hissing breath.

"I-I…" the man stammered and then drifted into silence. "To hell with it. I can't do this. This is just a game. I'll tell you whatever you want."

"Good!" Jason said. "You're learning. Let's start with your name."

"My name's Paul," he muttered.

"Well, Paul, we need to know how many of your troops are in the army sitting outside. It would also be helpful to know the basic breakdown of classes."

Paul's eyes bored holes into the floor as he replied sullenly, "We have a little over one hundred players. At a guess, we have about 40 melee troops, 30 ranged, 20 casters, and a scattering of random classes."

"Good boy!" Jason said. "Who is leading your group?"

Paul gulped before responding, "Her name is Lauren. She is the leader of the <War Dogs>."

Frank snorted. "<War Dogs>? Is that the name of your guild?"

"Yes," the man said defensively, glancing at Frank. "It wasn't my choice."

"I take it that you all are here for the bounty?" Jason asked.

Paul simply nodded sullenly, his eyes back on the floor. He fidgeted slightly, straining at the tight bindings on his wrists.

"Don't worry," Frank said in a stage whisper to Paul. "I made sure you can't get free. Believe it or not, I used to be a boy scout," he added with a chuckle, making the scout's honor gesture with his hand.

"How much of the dungeon do you have mapped so far?" Jason asked. He already knew the answer to this question, but he needed to make this interrogation feel real.

"Not much," Paul replied. "Your spider things keep attacking us."

Jason laughed. "That is their purpose after all." Then he watched Paul for a long moment, letting the silence lengthen until Paul began to fidget again. Jason watched carefully as Paul glanced surreptitiously around the room, mentally cataloging the corpses and loot. Then his eyes drifted to the stairwell in the center of the room.

Good, Jason thought gleefully. *I hope you draw some conclusions from that.*

"Well, you have been a great sport, Paul. I think it's time we return you to your friends. We want to give them a fighting chance after all."

Jason hesitated. "Or we could leave you in one of the cells. That might be easier." The man paled and began to stammer a response, but Jason held up a hand. "I'm not that cruel," he said with a grin.

Then he motioned to Riley. "Toodles," she said glibly before lashing forward in a single lightning-fast stroke. Paul choked as blood gushed from the newly formed tear in his neck. He strained futilely against his restraints as he collapsed to the floor. A few moments later his body went still.

As the death notification appeared in Jason's combat window, he turned to Frank and Riley. "You think that worked?" he asked.

Frank shrugged. "Probably. I made sure to mention we were blindfolding him so that he wouldn't know the path to the center of the maze. I even added that it should trick his map." He grinned at Riley. "Riley hissed at me to shut up. It was very convincing."

Riley laughed lightly. "I'd never pass on an opportunity to tell you to shut it." Then she looked evenly at Jason, adding in a more serious tone, "I think it has a strong chance of working."

"Fantastic," Jason said. "Then I guess we need to get ready."

Chapter 29 - Hoodwinked

Claire walked back into the control room to find Robert sitting on the pedestal in the center of the room. His attention was riveted on the screen hovering above the lab. This wasn't unusual. What was disconcerting was the group of techs that stood around Robert. Claire noticed money changing hands while a man scrawled names and figures on a glowing blue board projected into the air beside him.

"What on earth are you doing now?" Claire asked, irritation in her voice.

Robert glanced at her for a moment before turning his attention back to the screen. "What does it look like? We're taking bets on whether Jason's latest plan will work." He motioned at the screen. "One of the enemy players just respawned. You've got to hear this."

Claire scowled at the screen. Paul had just reappeared at the entrance to the dungeon. His camera panned down to reveal familiar cloth attire. Paul sighed heavily and trudged over to the player encampment.

As he neared the camp, Lauren approached him. "What happened?" the angry girl asked, glaring at him. "The others respawned a long time ago. Did you try to run?" she asked in a derisive tone.

Paul frowned at the guild leader. "Not exactly. Jason's group decided to capture me. He is working with at least two other players." He shook his head slightly, causing the camera to tilt erratically. "They wanted information regarding our numbers and composition. They were even willing to torture me to get the info."

Lauren's eyes widened as she watched him. "Did you tell them anything?"

"Of course!" Paul said. "This is a freaking game – not a real war. I'm not getting stabbed and repeatedly mutilated over this. Besides, how does it help them to know how many of us there are?"

The girl nodded slowly, grudgingly accepting his response. "You still should have lied. Did you at least learn anything?"

Paul sighed. "They are stealing our gear and piling up the corpses. They also took me to a room that I assume is hidden somewhere within the maze. It was a large circular room, and I saw a ramp leading down to a lower level. I think the maze is just the first of several levels."

"Hmm," Lauren said, pacing in front of him as she processed this new information. "No chance that they revealed the path to that room?"

Paul snorted roughly. "They blindfolded me after they captured me. They said it would stop my map from updating."

An irritated look flashed across Lauren's face. Then she hesitated.

“Did it?” she finally asked.

“Did it what?” Paul snapped, clearly frustrated with all the questions.

“Did your map update?” Lauren asked with exaggerated patience.

It was Paul’s turn to hesitate. His hand floated in front of the camera, and he pulled up his player map. It clearly traced the path he had taken through the maze and showed the large circular room where Jason and his group had interrogated him.

He laughed softly. “What a bunch of idiots. The blindfold didn’t do anything. My map updated. I know exactly how to get us to the center of the maze. Give me a second, and I’ll share it with you.”

A smile crept across Lauren’s face. “Perfect,” she purred.

Then she turned to the other players in the camp. “Hey, you assholes get up. We’re about to assault this dungeon and Paul here is going to show us the way. Jason is going down!”

A cheer went up among the players, and excited grins appeared on many faces. After several hours of painstaking scouting and being attacked by nightmare spiders, they were ready for some revenge.

As the players readied themselves to enter the dungeon, Claire noticed money changing hands to the angry expressions of some of the techs. “I feel like I’m missing something. What just happened?”

Robert slowly stood and started walking to the door. “We’re about to get some epic footage,” he said over his shoulder.

“Then where are you going?” Claire asked in an exasperated tone.

Robert turned and grinned at her. “To get some popcorn of course!”

* * *

Jason started slightly as he heard a loud thump against the door to the Minotaur’s Lair. The group was currently huddled behind the massive stone throne, their mobile healing totem sandwiched between them. Bert struggled in vain against his restraints while he moaned softly. Riley glared at the man before unsheathing her dagger and sliding it against Bert’s stomach. He wisely decided to shut up.

The door slammed open, and the group heard footsteps pound the stone floor as enemy players entered the room.

Wait thirty seconds, Jason reminded himself. His hand clutched at one of his daggers anxiously, and he could feel his pulse pounding in his veins. His anxiety was barely dulled by the icy chill of his dark mana.

“Ahh, I see that our guests have arrived,” a voice croaked from the other side of the throne.

The zombie decoys that Jason had left in the throne room were roughly the same size and shape as Jason, Frank, and Riley. Their faces were shrouded by heavy cloaks which swayed gently in the pulsing red mist that emanated from Bert and swept around the throne. As he heard the players enter, Jason idly wished he could see the show from the players' perspective.

"I'm back for some revenge, asshole," Jason heard Paul yell. He couldn't help but smile at that. Frank huffed softly, trying to suppress a laugh, and Riley punched him lightly.

Jason could still hear pounding feet as more players entered the room. *Ten seconds*, Jason thought.

"We'll see about that," Jason's decoy cackled. Then the zombie broke into a hacking cough, and Jason heard a faint splash of congealed blood and mucus hitting the floor.

"What the hell…" Paul began. After a short delay, he screamed, "Attack them now."

Too late, Jason thought gleefully.

One of his decoy zombies pushed down hard on the levers next to the stone throne. The doors to the room slammed shut with a heavy thud, and Jason heard the click of the locking mechanism sliding into place. The players trapped outside the room began banging frantically on the door. At the same time, the gates around the room began to open, and the zombie mages standing inside completed their spells.

A blizzard swiftly formed in the air near the door, shards of ice materializing above the heads of the players and then plummeting downward. The jagged shards shredded the players' skin and armor and froze any body part they touched. Patches of ice appeared on the ground, and walls of fire appeared between the grates and the players, providing cover for Jason's melee troops as they moved into position.

Frank and Riley darted from behind the throne, the skeleton minotaur carrying Bert lumbering just behind them. Jason glanced around the corner of the throne. He could see that nearly forty players had made it into the room before the door shut and he winced. That was more than he'd anticipated. This was going to be close.

There was no time to cry over spilt milk. The Venom Spitters perched above the door spat acid down on the players, the green substance splashing across the faces of the troops closest to the door. Screams filled the air, adding to the chaos as the players rubbed vainly at their eyes. Meanwhile, Riley's bow hummed, taking the life of more than one player before they could recover.

Despite the devastating ambush, the players regrouped quickly.

"Tanks to the outside – form a circle – casters inside," Paul screamed, darting into the interior of the group. The bulkier players moved forward, and the clank of steel could be heard as heavy tower

shields struck the stone floor, forming a rough shell around themselves.

"Healers, focus on the wounded. Fire mages, get rid of this ice cover, and ice mages extinguish the walls," Paul continued commanding the player forces. Fireballs promptly rocketed through the air, extinguishing the blizzard while bolts of ice splashed against the firewalls. Soon thick steam had filled the area around the door, obscuring the players from sight.

While the enemy troops regrouped, Jason's zombies rushed from the cages. The firewalls and steam provided good cover, concealing their movements as they formed a phalanx on either side of the players. Another two dozen zombies met with Frank in the center of the room and stood in front of the healing totem.

"Charge," Frank yelled, not waiting for the players to completely recover before launching his attack. He held his axes aloft and began channeling *Rage of the Herd*. His body started to glow with an ominous red aura that quickly spread to the attacking zombies. Their decaying limbs and skin pulsed with the red energy, and their milky eyes took on a feral gleam.

Acting quickly, Jason sent in several zombies ahead of the charge as his fingers moved through his *Corpse Explosion* spell. If he timed the explosion right, he could stagger the defensive line of players without injuring his own troops. Just before he was about to complete the casting, he heard a whisper behind him. Acting on instinct, Jason aborted his spell and dove forward. A bone shield swung into the position where he had been standing a moment before.

A pair of daggers struck the plate of bone with incredible force, shattering the disc into several fragments that clattered onto the stone floor. A player robed in black leather stood beside Jason, momentarily stunned at having missed his target. Jason took advantage of the hesitation, beginning to cast *Curse of Weakness* as he backed toward the cages. Meanwhile, his mages redirected bolts of energy toward the rogue.

The player gave chase, nimbly dodging the first two arcane missiles. Then Jason's curse struck. The sharp black needle penetrated the player's stomach, and insidious black energy spread swiftly through his body. Under the slowing effects of the curse, the next lance of ice struck the player's leg, impaling the limb. Jason reversed direction, drawing his blades. Before the player could react, Jason pounced on him, driving his daggers into his throat. Blood jetted from the wound and drenched Jason's hands.

He looked up at the battle, his eyes cold and calculating. He had missed his chance to weaken the defenders with his *Corpse Explosion,* and Frank was now engaging them in melee. Jason

sheathed his blades, and he raised the would-be assassin as a new zombie. He moved back to the cover of the throne, keeping this new minion as a bodyguard in case there were any other close encounters.

Jason's eyes darted back to the battle. Frank was a whirlwind of steel, his axes slamming into the enemy tanks. Yet their shields held against his blows. Roaring in frustrated rage, fire curled up the handles of Frank's axes and clung to the steel. Each swing caused the air to ripple around him and lit the enemies' weapons and armor on fire. His attacks were slowly breaking through their line.

Yet it came at a cost. Jason saw Frank's health plummet, the red mist emanating from the healing totem insufficient to heal his injuries. Riley assisted Frank, her black missiles penetrating cracks in the tanks' armor. Occasionally, a carefully targeted *Blood Mist* arrow struck home, and the red mist thickened, increasing the healing effect which was just barely keeping Frank in action. Jason couldn't afford to redirect his lone light mage from healing Bert. Their healing totem was the only thing keeping many of the undead alive.

Then the players reacted. Suddenly, the floor rumbled, and a wave of stone rocketed from the enemy's line, slamming into Jason's zombies on each flank. The unexpected movement sent them tumbling backward. A barrage of fireballs followed the attack, striking Jason's prone troops and setting many undead ablaze. Meanwhile, the injured players holding the shield wall were bathed in white light that swiftly healed their injuries.

Jason's troops were being sustained by the healing totem, suffering few casualties from the players' onslaught. Yet, by the same token, the <War Dogs> were regrouping, and few were falling due to their own healers. This was quickly going to turn into a battle of attrition as each side tried to outheal the other. As Jason watched an enemy mage chug a mana potion, he decided they probably wouldn't win a prolonged battle.

He stepped forward around the stone throne, resting a hand on Riley's shoulder. "Kill the healers," he said in a dark voice, pointing to the white-robed men and women on the interior of the enemy's formation.

Riley nodded curtly and then jumped up on the stone throne. She drew her bow back and sighted carefully along the arrow as dark energy throbbed and pulsed around the tip. The collection of dark mana grew swiftly, seeming to suck in the faint light cast by the torches in the room. Yet Riley still held the string taut, letting the energy grow until it was nearly three feet wide.

Riley's position on the throne gave her the elevation to hit the mages, but it also made her an easy target. Jason could see multiple bolts of ice and fire being summoned by the enemy mages, directed

towards Riley's position. Then the bolts raced toward Riley. Jason ordered a zombie into the line of fire, its decaying body absorbing two lances of ice, yet more were coming. In a moment of desperation, Jason scrambled up on the throne behind Riley. He destroyed another undead, replacing his missing bone shield and shifted the three discs in front of Riley.

Jason watched as though in slow motion as the bolts of magic slammed into the bone shields, shattering the discs into pieces. As the last disc broke, Riley regained her line of sight on the healers and released. The massive dark sphere rocketed across the room at an incredible speed. The missile narrowly missed the whaling limbs of Jason's zombies, skimmed above Frank's shoulder on the frontlines, and danced among the moving crowd of enemy players. Then the arrow struck home, burying itself in the chest of a white-robed mage.

The man's body exploded in a torrential shower of blood. Yet the damage didn't stop there. The black energy created a vortex that sucked in another nearby healer, dark tendrils of energy wrapping around the man's limbs and tearing at his flesh. He screamed feebly, but his calls for help were cut short as another black missile buried itself in his neck. Jason glanced at Riley and saw that the string of her bow was humming from the release of another arrow.

Damn, I like this girl, he thought with a grin.

Capitalizing on Riley's attack, Jason's hands were already forming the familiar gestures of his *Specialized Zombie* spell. As he completed the spell, dark shadows lanced from his hands and shot toward the corpse of the fallen healer. The new zombie opened its milky eyes but remained prone for a long moment. As the players recovered from the attack and their attention shifted to the zombie horde around them, Jason ordered the mage to stand and slowly approach the front line near Frank. As he did, the zombie healed Frank continuously, light coating his body and refilling his failing health bar.

"What are you doing?" Paul yelled at the healer, noticing that he was targeting an enemy.

The former mage smiled in response and promptly exploded. Dark energy cascaded from his corpse in an expanding ring, striking the unsuspecting enemy tanks from behind. The shield wall staggered, and Frank took advantage of the moment of weakness, plunging into the enemy's formation.

"Kill them all!" Frank roared into the air as his axe cut into a wounded player's shoulder. Without stopping, his other axe sliced into the throat of a nearby mage and partially severed his head. A player who had been knocked to the ground behind Frank pulled himself to his feet. He rushed at the burly warrior, stabbing Frank in the back

with his blade. With a cry of pain, Frank spun and chopped off the player's hand, the flames from his axe cauterizing the wound. With a manic smile and surrounded by enemies, Frank left the player's weapon in his back as he continued to strike around himself with unabated fury.

Jason ordered his zombies through the opening that Frank had created. His undead poured through the hole in the enemy line and began slaughtering the more-fragile casters inside. The mages futilely began casting spells in quick succession, but the damage was being healed by the blood mist that poured from the skeletal totem within the undead ranks. Any players that fell were soon raised by Jason, adding to his forces.

Watching the battle carefully, Jason could see that the fight was already over. The death of the enemy's healers and his ability to replace his troops had turned the tide of the battle. He hopped down from the stone throne and moved to the levers. He pushed another rod, causing the floor to tremble as the ramp opened in the center of the room.

He glanced at the door to the Minotaur King's throne room, seeing that a large crack had formed in the stone surface. It wouldn't be long before the other players broke into the chamber. They would need to move quickly to get into position for the next part of their plan.

Jason glanced at Frank's blood-covered form, his blades still whirling among the players. To Jason's side, Riley's dark eyes surveyed the battle dispassionately as her arrows dispatched player after player. A grin crept across Jason's face as he considered what was coming next. These players should have never tried to screw with them.

Chapter 30 - Warlike

No work was being accomplished in the control room at Cerillion Entertainment. The technicians sat with mouths agape as they watched the events unfolding on the screen. A group of players stood amidst a sea of undead, their numbers dwindling quickly against the onrushing hordes.

Paul looked around frantically, the camera tilting and panning with nervous energy. A stray shard of rock struck a nearby mage in the head, caving in the poor man's skull and showering Paul in his blood. The battlefield had taken on a grim cast, the stone floor painted red and a thick crimson mist permeating the room. Paul's knuckles were white as he clutched his staff, his free hand dancing feebly through the motions of another spell.

Paul saw the glimmer of a throwing blade arcing toward him, giving him little time to dodge. He let out a resigned groan. Then the blade clanged against a steel tower shield. One of the few remaining tanks had blocked the dagger, and he now stood in front of Paul, his bulk shielding Paul from the missiles that flew through the room.

"Keep casting," the tank growled, not bothering to look at Paul to see if he had followed through with the command.

Suddenly, a hulking man carrying an enormous battle axe in each hand rushed out of the mist and leaped toward the tank. He wore only light leather armor, and his eyes were wild. Flames danced along the length of his axe blades as they slammed into the tank's shield with a clang of metal. Paul's defender buckled, sliding back nearly a foot under the force of his opponent's blow. The tank smiled grimly as his shield pulsed with electrical energy, lightning arcing from the shield and retaliating against the attacker.

The burly barbarian's body spasmed uncontrollably for a moment. The tank took advantage of the stunning effect from his shield, drawing his sword arm back. Electricity crackled along the length of the blade, growing in force and intensity until a humming sound could be heard over the din of the battle. He lunged forward toward his prone opponent, lightning flashing through the air around his blade.

Just before impact, a bolt of black energy struck the tank. The crowd in the lab gasped as the player's head exploded violently, blood splattering Paul's face and obscuring his vision. Red rivulets appeared on the camera, and Paul rubbed at his eyes, trying to remove the liquid that ran down his face.

As the screen cleared, the technicians could see that Paul was the only <War Dog> left standing. Around him lay a mass of torn and tattered bodies. Blood had settled on the floor in thick pools. Paul glanced

around anxiously. Dark forms surrounded him in the blood mist, their milky-white eyes barely visible through the haze. Yet they didn't make any move to attack him.

The burly barbarian in front of Paul shook himself, working feeling back into his limbs. Blood and sweat dripped down his muscular arms, and he looked at Paul with thinly disguised rage. He took a calming breath and looped the hilts of his axes on leather straps hanging from his belt. A pair of dark forms approached through the mist. One was a woman dressed in dark leather armor, a glowing crimson bow in her hand. The other was a man, his face shrouded by a thick black cloak and plates of bone orbiting him like a black hole.

Jason motioned to the warrior who still stood beside Paul. "Good job, Frank."

Frank nodded curtly.

Then Jason's gaze swept back to Paul. "So, what was it that you called me again?"

Paul gulped hard. His voice quavered slightly as he replied, "I called you an asshole. I stand by it."

A broad smile crept across Riley's face, her eyes following Paul carefully. "You seem like a slow learner. I wonder if you're representative of your guild. Are all the <War Dogs> morons?"

Frank barked a harsh laugh. "There's apparently a low bar to start a guild. Maybe we should start our own!"

"Who would take people like you?" Paul spat without thinking.

Riley nodded, a thoughtful look on her face. "You're right. We certainly aren't saints. Maybe this game needs a guild for sinners."

"I like that," Jason said softly. "A guild for the outcasts of this world." He approached Paul slowly, his hand lazily pulling a dagger from a sheath at his waist. "What do you think, Paul? Should we form a guild?"

The screen shook gently as Paul trembled. "I-I don't care what you do. Just end it," he stuttered.

"Now, now," Jason said threateningly. "Don't be hasty. After all, we still need a name for our guild."

The hooded figure considered Paul's trembling form as he tapped the tip of his dagger against his lips in thought. Then Jason's mouth curled into a vicious smile. He suddenly lunged forward, and his blade ripped across Paul's throat. The camera jerked as Paul dropped to his knees, clutching at his throat and letting out a surprised gurgle.

Jason grabbed Paul's hair roughly, tilting his face to meet his. Only his lips were visible under his cowled hood. "A name just came to me. Our guild will be called <Original Sin>. Since I expect you're recording this, I'd like to add that we're now recruiting."

Frank and Riley stood behind Jason, their faces grim and their bodies painted in the blood of the fallen. Jason glanced at them before

turning back to Paul. "We don't want your saints or your heroes. We want the wretched and rejected. We want the players who hide in the shadows and strike without restraint."

The hooded man raised his blade, Paul's fresh blood dripping from the tip. "If you think you have what it takes, come to the Twilight Throne." Then the blade slammed home, and the screen went dark.

"Wow," Robert muttered around a mouthful of popcorn. "That's one hell of a recruitment video."

Claire didn't respond. She bit her lip as she considered what she had just seen – what she had seen over the last few weeks. This wasn't an isolated event. Before, there was always a plan or purpose behind Jason's actions. Now he just appeared to act on a whim. It was almost as though he enjoyed the violence. On top of that, she still had her suspicions that Jason had somehow captured Alfred's attention. She could feel fear curl in her stomach. What was she going to do? What could she do?

* * *

Riley, Frank, and Jason were jogging through the ruined city. Jason's breath came in ragged gasps, and he could feel his legs ache as they ran. He knew it wasn't real. None of this was real. Yet sometimes it was easy to forget.

"Do you think Pint made it through to Rex?" Riley asked as they ran.

Jason shook his head. "No idea, but I didn't gamble on the imp. I hid another two zombies in the maze and ordered them to circle back to the entrance once the players made it to the throne room."

Frank chuckled. "You might be worthless in a fight, but remind me never to get on your bad side. You're one clever bastard."

Jason laughed. Then he remembered what they had left to accomplish and his smile quickly shifted to a look of grim determination. This fight was far from over. The group had quickly looted and raised the player corpses and then vacated the throne room. Jason had been bombarded by notifications after the first battle, but he didn't have time to tinker with his Character Status. They needed to hurry and set up stage two of the plan. Jason could only hope that the enemy players would give chase.

If Lauren were clever, she would have realized the throne room was a trap as soon as the doors slammed shut. He was hoping that her next step would be to send a scout back to the entrance. If Pint or Jason's zombies made it to Rex, then the undead forces should have set up a defensive line to stop any players from leaving the dungeon.

There were more than three divisions sitting outside the dungeon, and even Lauren's guild would have trouble with that many undead.

If Jason was lucky, the enemy players might have left a defensive force at their camp. There were more players in this army than Jason had been expecting. He didn't mind the idea of Rex thinning out the group. He couldn't raise those bodies, but he was beginning to doubt whether they could accomplish his plan at all. That last fight had been a close call.

He wasn't certain what Lauren's next move would be. He tried to put himself in her shoes. If he were her, he would realize he couldn't easily fight his way out of the dungeon. The dungeon entrance was narrow, and the undead outnumbered the remaining players. There was also a considerable risk that Jason would attack from behind while the players were engaged with the undead. Then the <War Dogs> would be trapped and flanked. Yet if Lauren took out Jason, she accomplished her mission and her group could then either log out or fight their way back out of the dungeon.

"If I were her, I'd keep hunting," Jason muttered.

"What was that?" Frank panted. He had become more self-assured and confident, but running would never be something he enjoyed.

"Just talking to myself," Jason replied quickly.

As the group neared the courtyard where the main road through the ruined city split in two, they slowed. Jason eyed the crater he had formed in the stone floor during the battle with the cultists. Blood had dried on the stones, dying it a rusty red. He might need to take such drastic measures again. They had only narrowly made it through that last fight. This group of players was well-equipped and was experienced at fighting together. If it weren't for the surprise attack in the throne room, he knew that his corpse would already be cooling on the stone floor while the <War Dogs> posted a humiliating video of his defeat.

"Jason!" a loud voice echoed through the cave.

He turned and saw the players streaming out of the tunnel to the Minotaur King's throne room. Their forms stood out sharply on the ledge overlooking the city. A short girl stood in the front of the group, shouting over the city, "You think we're trapped here? We're going to hunt you down and then destroy your army."

"Mouthy little brat, isn't she?" Riley muttered.

Jason grinned. "Then let's shut her up."

With a mental command, Jason started the next part of the plan. His minotaurs released the loaded catapults he had positioned on the roofs of several buildings around the city. Zombies hurtled through the sky toward the stone ledge, their forms faintly illuminated

in the multicolored glow cast by the crystals embedded in the ceiling. Jason's hands moved swiftly, dark energy swirling and curling around his fingers. As he completed his spell, shadows lanced forward through the enormous cavern.

The players on the ledge noticed the dark bodies racing toward them at the last minute. Bolts of ice and fire spat from the ledge, attempting to knock the undead off course. They were too late. The zombies slammed into the players, their decaying arms locking onto the nearest person to prevent them from being tossed over the ledge. Then the shadows struck.

Dark mana and shrapnel exploded from the undead creatures. Jason had loaded his cannon fodder zombies with the scrap gear he had collected earlier. Pieces of the armor that had once protected the players now shredded their flesh. Screams rang out along the ledge, and several players tumbled over the cliff face, hitting the ground below in a sickening series of thuds.

Yet the next barrage of zombies was already in the air. Unfortunately, the enemy group reacted more quickly this time. They closed ranks on the ledge, and their casters neatly destroyed the zombies hurtling toward them. Flashes of light also sprang up among the group, healing the injured and putting them back on the front line.

Jason turned from the battle; there was no sense wasting more zombies. The point was to harass them and kill a few players, not pin them on the ledge. Jason's eyes settled on Riley as she surveyed the effects of his catapults.

"You know what to do, Riley," Jason said quietly. "Circle behind them and focus on the healers. Kill as many as you can."

Riley nodded curtly. "I know," she replied. She moved to start down a side street, but Jason grabbed her arm.

"Good luck," he said.

Riley grinned back at him, her dark eyes dancing with excitement. "Don't need it," she said. Then she took off down the street at a quick jog, Jason's eyes following her back until she disappeared around a bend in the road.

His gazed shifted to the broad boulevard that ran the length of the city. Abandoned houses and shops sandwiched the street, their dark windows staring out onto the wreckage that littered the ground. Soon the players would be streaming down it. Only thirty zombies stood in the courtyard with Jason, the healing totem towering over the group and causing a thick red mist to curl around their feet. Jason's mages had taken up positions on nearby roofs, hiding in the shadows.

Frank rested a hand on Jason's shoulder. "Remember, you need to survive. If Riley and I fall in this fight, make sure you begin phase

three."

Jason glanced at his friend. Frank was going to have the most difficult role in this next battle, standing at the frontlines and holding the enemy's attention. He would be outnumbered and outgunned and almost certain to die. Yet Jason could see the determination in his eyes. He no longer looked upon this game with trepidation or dread. Frank himself was now something to be feared. His arms and legs rippled with muscle and blood still stained his skin and face, giving him an almost crazed look.

"Don't get all mushy on me," Jason muttered. "It's just a game."

Frank's eyes bored into him, his face serious. "You said it yourself at the café. This isn't a game for you anymore. It hasn't felt like one for a while now for me either. Hell, I'm probably going to die in this battle. I'm not looking forward to that sensation again. Make my death count."

The world around Jason stuttered for a second and an image flitted in his mind's eye. Undead warriors stood on the battlements of an ancient city, obsidian plate armor covering their bodies. Fires blazed in the sky, and winged demons made of flame attacked the walls. Jason stood over a fallen soldier. He bowed his head for a moment and in a cracked voice, bid his comrade goodbye. *"May the darkness claim you, brother."*

Then he raised his eyes to the walls where fiery claws scraped at the parapet. The shrill scratches sent a shiver down his back. A demonic head loomed over the wall, tendrils of flame emanating from its body and singeing the stone as its rage-filled eyes glared at him. Jason pulled his sword free from its scabbard with a screech of metal and stood to face his enemy. He would hold the line for his kin.

As quickly as the image had come, it was gone. Jason was left staring at Frank's determined face. Acting on instinct, he reached out and clasped his friend's arm. "May the darkness claim you, brother."

Frank didn't pull away. Instead, he nodded and then moved to take his position on the frontline with the other zombies. Jason shook his head forcefully, trying to clear the memory. He then glanced at Alfred who sat nearby. The cat's feline eyes drilled into his and Jason knew the AI was responsible for the memory. Yet more than that, he knew that Alfred was weighing and measuring him, evaluating his conversations with Frank and Riley.

I get it, you stupid cat. I need them.

Jason could have sworn that Alfred smirked at him. With a huff of frustration, he jogged farther back into the city, moving into position. He had already picked out a tall three-story building to hide in on the northwest side of the ruins. It had a good view of the main street and a back door that he could use to escape when the shit

invariably hit the digital fan.

Jason stood at one of the windows, while Alfred perched on the sill beside him. Jason had kept the light mage and a single extra zombie for himself, positioning the undead to stand sentry at the doorway. He had learned his lesson about rogues back in the Minotaur King's throne room, but he couldn't spare any more minions for his own defense.

The players streamed down the ramps leading into the city and collected at the end of the main street, forming neat ranks. Instead of an uncontrolled rush, the force made their way down the street slowly. Every few steps, fire mages would hurl balls of energy into the adjacent shops and houses, causing gouts of flame to jet from the windows and doorways of the buildings.

"Damn it," Jason whispered. Clearly, the players had anticipated the ambush from his zombies on either side of the street. He had stationed most of his zombies in those buildings, hoping to harass and flank the players as they made their way down the street.

"That is unfortunate," Alfred said softly.

Jason shook his head. It wasn't over yet. As quickly as he could, he ordered his zombies hiding in the buildings along the street to move up to the second and third stories of each structure where they would be relatively protected. He would have to change his plan now. Maybe he could still use the remaining undead, but they would have to flank the players once they arrived at the courtyard.

Lauren's army continued edging their way forward until they were closing in on the square. Frank raised his axes in the air and roared at the opposing army. The undead around him echoed his shout. Red tendrils of smoke curled around the group, partially obscuring their bodies and painting them crimson.

Jason knew that Frank understood the benefits of intimidation. The players had to realize by now that Jason had lured them here, trapped them inside this dungeon, and taken out nearly half their number. His grotesque creations had been harassing them for hours now, and Jason had just lobbed zombie grenades into the middle of their group. Now they were facing a group of blood-soaked undead in the middle of a ruined city, ancient stone structures looming beside them.

I hope they're scared shitless, Jason thought. Yet as he watched the <War Dogs>, worry bloomed in his mind. He didn't know the enemy's exact number, but this group seemed smaller than he would have expected.

Lauren made her way to the front of the army, eyeing Frank's force skeptically. "Is this it?" she asked. "We have over fifty players here, and you think you can take us with a group half our size."

Frank grinned at her, his eyes filling with rage as he considered the fight that was about to unfold. “I wouldn’t worry about it, pipsqueak,” he replied evenly. “We just wanted to make certain it was a fair fight.”

Lauren glared at Frank angrily. “Go ahead,” she retorted. “Underestimate me because of my size. Jason certainly has.”

At this last statement, Lauren waved at the rooftops of the nearby buildings. Rogues materialized out of thin air, driving their blades into Jason’s hidden mages. The undead toppled from the roofs, their decaying bodies slamming onto the ground below.

“Damn it,” Jason muttered. He knew something had felt off about Lauren’s numbers. She had ordered her thieves to flank the mages through the side streets. Jason glanced at his party menu in concern but breathed a mental sigh of relief when he saw that Riley was still standing. She must have slipped past the thieves while in *Sneak*.

Frank let out a loud laugh. “I like your style. I guess there’s just more for me now.”

Without any further ceremony, Frank surged forward. His legs rippled and contorted, thick black hair growing from his skin. His shins snapped and shifted backward with a sickening popping sound, and his charge faltered slightly. Then the transformation completed. Frank leaped through the air, his feet cracking the stones of the road from the force of his lunge.

He sailed over the line of players, axes held high. Flames curled up one blade while a thick coating of ice covered the other. His axe blades simultaneously struck a mage as he landed, his momentum and the force of his swing neatly severing the man’s head from his shoulders. Blood fountained from the wound, drenching the nearby players. Yet Frank didn’t stop. His axes whirled and spun in the air as he struck around himself in a frenzy.

At the same time, Jason’s zombies struck the enemies’ front line. The confusion caused by Frank’s charge had distracted the tanks on the army’s leading edge, giving Jason’s troops the opportunity to cut a hole in the enemy line. The undead charged into the row of weapons fearlessly, their blades cutting down the players.

Acting quickly, Jason regrouped his zombies that were in the houses farther down the street. He ordered them out onto the main boulevard and then commanded them to charge the enemy players from behind. Their roars echoed through the street, and several players turned to see that they were being flanked from behind. The <War Dogs> reacted immediately, melee players moving to face the rear of the group. This created a defensive wall for the casters but weakened the enemy’s front line. With the rogues on the rooftops and

unable to help their teammates, the zombies could approach unimpeded.

Jason's hands were already moving, and the leading edge of zombies exploded violently, killing a few players outright and injuring others. Yet their wounds were quickly closed as the healers repeatedly cast their healing spells, waves of light crashing down on their failing colleagues.

As Jason watched, the fighting began to stabilize. After his troops' initial rush, the players' line wavered and then held. The mages began to fight back, bolts of flame and frost rocketing out of the center of the group and striking Jason's undead. Clever earth mages summoned barriers of stone to partition the front lines from the weaker casters. Jason looked on with a bleak expression as he saw his undead began to fall.

A dark bolt of energy suddenly rocketed through the air and struck one of the healers in the group from behind. Jason glanced up at the rooftops of the buildings on the southern portion of the city. He spotted Riley's form perched behind the players, her crimson red bow drawn and the string vibrating. She repeatedly fired into the group, her arrows aiming for the healers.

Lauren shouted over the battle, "They're targeting the healers! Tanks, cover the casters." Several heavily armored players responded immediately, withdrawing into the interior of the group and covering the healers with their tower shields.

This saved the casters from Riley's arrows, but it weakened the lines further. The orderly defenses disappeared altogether as scattered pockets of fighting broke out in the street. A clearing appeared around Frank's form where he stood next to the healing totem. His skin was marred with long gashes, and he limped slightly.

Lauren approached him at a casual walk, glancing at Frank disdainfully. Almost faster than Jason's eyes could follow, she darted forward. Bright flashes of light appeared as she moved. Then Frank's body jerked, and something that sounded like gunfire echoed through the cavern. The next time she paused, Jason could see that Lauren was wielding two pistols. She fired at Frank as she changed position with blinding speed. His friend could barely keep up, holding his blades in front of him defensively and the bullets pinging off the metal. Yet more than one bullet penetrated his skin.

A quick glance at Frank's health bar showed that he was falling fast despite the rejuvenating effects of the healing totem. Jason futilely tried to cast *Curse of Weakness*, hoping to slow the girl down. He was guessing she was using some type of air magic to obtain that kind of speed, or maybe some type of short-range teleportation.

Lauren suddenly stopped attacking. Frank staggered in place,

weaving slightly, yet Lauren didn't follow up on her advantage. Instead, she appeared directly beside the healing totem. She raised a pistol slowly, resting it against Bert's temple. Then she pulled the trigger. Bert's body jerked and fell to the ground with a limp thud. The blood mist quickly began to dissipate, along with its healing properties. As a result, Jason's zombies began to fall in greater numbers.

Lauren moved to Frank where he had slumped to his knees. "I told you not to underestimate me," she spat. "I guess you've learned your lesson."

In one last-ditch effort, Frank lunged forward with his axes. Yet Lauren anticipated the attack. Teleporting behind him in a flash of light, she raised her pistols and fired. Jason saw Frank's window on the party menu gray out. He had died.

A cold rage bubbled and frothed in Jason's veins. It was a game, but that girl had just executed his friend. He surveyed the battle, where his remaining zombies were beginning to fall. He ordered his small protection detail behind him and out of line of sight. Then his fingers began a terrible dance. Shadowy energy wound around his hands and up his arms while black tattoos of energy crawled over his skin. Unbeknownst to Jason, dark energy had begun to swirl around the building he occupied, obscuring the cracked stone from view. As the mass of dark energy reached critical mass, Jason closed his eyes.

Then he released.

The unholy mana rolled away from the building like a tidal wave. Where it struck the zombies in the courtyard below, they exploded violently, crippling and wounding the remaining players in the courtyard. A rapid-fire series of explosions rocked the battle as all of Jason's remaining zombies flew apart in a wave of destruction.

As the debris cleared, Jason saw that they had wiped out nearly two-thirds of the enemy force. Yet many were still standing, including Lauren. Although, he was pleased to note that she was limping. She motioned to the building Jason was standing in, and the remaining players started heading in his direction. As Jason turned to flee, his last sight was of the remaining white-robed players being gunned down by Riley.

Good, he thought grimly.

He sprinted down the stairs of the building and exited out the back. Then Jason and his two remaining zombies sprinted towards the tunnel leading to the Hydra's den. A glance over his shoulder showed that he was being followed by the enemy players in the distance. The occasional stray bolt of energy skimmed past him, but he didn't slow his headlong dash.

As the entrance to the Hydra's den came into sight, Jason could feel his heart race. Pumping his legs harder, his chest heaved and he could feel a dull ache in his muscles. Something flashed in his peripheral vision. Glancing to the side, Jason saw Riley's status screen had grayed out.

He was the only one left. It was time for phase three.

Chapter 31 - Skittish

"Okay. What the hell is going on?" Robert muttered as he stared at the screen that loomed over the control room. The name "Lauren" flickered in the bottom right-hand corner of the display.

No one in the control room could offer an answer. Lauren and the other players had chased Jason into the narrow tunnel. The leader of the <War Dogs> now stood on the ridge overlooking the Hydra's den. Pools of green acid still lingered along the floor, faint bands of steam trailing up towards the crystalline ceiling. Three dark shapes were barely visible in the glow from the crystals embedded in the ceiling. The figures darted between the pools, heading directly for the waterfall on the far side of the room.

"Where do you think you're going, Jason?" Lauren shouted. "Do you plan to hide behind that waterfall?"

Lauren turned to the remaining players beside her. They only had twenty people left and nearly thirty minutes remaining on the first wave of respawns. "We need to finish this now," Lauren said in a lower voice. "If there's a passage behind the falls, then this could get complicated."

She eyed the players around her. "Everyone get down into the cave, but be careful. This guy is apparently full of tricks."

With that, Lauren leapt from the ledge. The camera tilted and spun erratically and steadied as she hit the floor of the cave. Faint arcs of electricity curled in front of her, signaling the end to her teleportation ability. Lauren's hands clutched at the grips of her pistols, her knuckles white against the curved hardwood as she surveyed the room. She spotted the figures nearing the lake edge and teleported forward again. This time, she stopped within range of her targets.

Without hesitation, Lauren executed a series of erratic, short jumps around the dark forms while unloading her pistols. The screen darted and jumped, many of the technicians having trouble following her movements.

"That girl is fast," Robert said appreciatively. "Either her reflexes are borderline inhuman, or she has become so accustomed to the short jumps that she no longer gets disoriented."

"She must be afraid of some kind of surprise attack," Claire replied quietly, leaning forward in her seat slightly in spite of her reserved tone. "Why else would she jump around so much?"

The group in the control room could see that Lauren's mana was plummeting as she flashed continuously. Yet her bullets struck home, penetrating the rotten flesh of her targets' legs. Each of the figures stumbled and fell to the stone floor as bolts of fire and ice slammed into their bodies, signaling that the other players had caught up with Lauren.

After a moment, the bodies lay still upon the banks of the lake. A silence descended over the cavern as the other players took up positions around Lauren.

"Is that it?" she muttered.

With a flick of her wrist, Lauren's combat log appeared in her field of view. The log showed that the targets had died, but the names of the enemies were only a row of question marks since they hadn't been identified. Lauren flashed forward again and walked the remaining few steps towards the corpses. She circled the group, kicking off the hoods one-by-one. The first two were regular zombies, their milky-white eyes now staring blankly into the distance. Then Lauren approached the third body hesitantly.

A murmur could be heard in the control room as the technicians watched the screen anxiously. "Did she kill him?" Claire asked in a whisper. Despite her concern about Alfred's connection to Jason, there was a note of disappointment in her voice. This seemed like an anticlimactic way for him to die.

Lauren paused over the final corpse. Then, with a quick movement, she kicked the hood free. Another milky-white pair of eyes looked back at her. Jason wasn't there. "Oh shit," Lauren muttered just before the floor of the cave began to tremble.

The camera spun back to the ridge overlooking the cave. A dark figure stood above the entrance to the cavern, his feet planted firmly on a disc of milky-white bone. However, it was the creature that was forming beneath him that caused the players' eyes to widen and their hands to shake. Enormous bones had been jammed up against the base of the ridge and out of sight. The bones rose slowly into the air, forming a monstrous creature. Its body was nearly twenty feet long and ten feet wide. Four skeletal, serpentine heads sprouted from its torso and whipped languidly through the air before focusing on the players in the cave.

"In formation now!" Lauren screamed desperately.

The players moved to form a rough line facing the skeletal Hydra, jostling one another in their haste. "How are we supposed to kill that thing?" a player asked.

A dark laugh erupted from the figure still hovering above the cave entrance. "You aren't," Jason replied. "You're all going to die here." With that last statement, the bone disc slid out from under him, and his feet hit the ground with a soft thump. He turned and jogged back up the tunnel into the ruined city.

"What a coward," Lauren muttered. The camera tilted slightly as she glanced at the corner of her vision and saw that her mana was still low from attacking the zombies. She still had enough for a few flashes, though. It might be just enough.

"Distract the Hydra," she ordered the other players. "I'm going after

Jason. We're going to finish this."

Lauren shot toward the skeleton Hydra, its heads looming above her. A serpentine appendage shot toward her, its skeletal maw gaping widely. At the last moment, she darted to the side, and the creature's jaw snapped shut on empty air. Lauren continued to dodge the heads as she neared the Hydra's body. Acting out of self-defense, all four Hydra heads focused on Lauren, racing toward her from different angles.

At the last moment, Lauren flashed forward again, landing lightly on the creature's back. Her nimble feet raced across its spine as she headed toward the ridge behind the Hydra. With the last of her mana, Lauren teleported the distance between the Hydra and the ledge, just managing to grab the stone lip. She yanked herself over the edge, taking a moment to catch her breath.

She opened her eyes to see another serpentine head looming above her. With a gasp, she rolled to the side quickly, the sound of crunching bones echoing through the cave as the snakelike head slammed into the stone where she had lain a moment before. She pulled herself to her feet and glanced at the dark tunnel before her. She could hear the screams of her teammates in the cavern below, signaling the death of her remaining allies.

"I'm going to kill you," Lauren muttered before sprinting into the tunnel.

* * *

Jason sprinted up the incline of the tunnel. He expected that one or two players might make it out of the cavern. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and any enemies as he could. Even if the remaining players didn't make it past the Hydra skeleton, Jason needed to hurry. He had a limited amount of time to raise new zombies and start stripping the player corpses before they began respawning.

His guess was that the first wave of players they had defeated in the Minotaur King's throne room would respawn at the entrance to the dungeon in about twenty minutes. He expected that the second and third groups of players killed in the courtyard and Hydra's den would likely respawn in the throne room a few minutes later.

By his calculation, he should still have about thirty minutes left to send a message to Rex. He needed a division of undead sitting in the throne room by the time the other players respawned. His best chance of keeping the players contained was to kill them as soon as they popped back into existence.

As he considered the critical timing of the next hour, Jason felt a wave of fatigue wash over him. He had been logged into the game for quite some time now without a break and the last few hours had been stressful. Frank and Riley were gone, and all of his zombies had been destroyed. Yet this ordeal still wasn't quite over.

Alfred ran lightly beside him, unperturbed by Jason's anxiety. "While that was an ingenious use of your *Bone Armor* ability back in the cave, it was not one that I envisioned when I designed the armor you are wearing." The cat glanced at him with what could only be described as an irritated expression. "I have made changes to the shields, and you will not be able to use them as a makeshift staircase again."

Jason grinned as he kept jogging. "Fair enough. At least it worked this time."

He had carefully set up the third phase of his plan. The Hydra's bones were too large and heavy to remove from the cave. That meant he needed to lure the players into the cavern. However, they needed to enter the cavern floor, not just linger on the ledge. Consequently, he had his zombies drag the bones up under the ledge and out-of-sight of the enemy players as they entered. He had also left a third decoy zombie sitting on the floor of the cave to pretend to be him.

Jason admitted that the use of the bone shields had been a gamble, and he had forgone testing them for fear that Alfred would prevent his unexpected use of the ability. While the AI could sense his short-term memories, Jason had observed that he needed to be intensely focused on him to do so.

Good thing for me that Alfred has plenty of other work to do monitoring the rest of the players and the game world.

Jason sprinted toward the courtyard in the center of the city. As soon as the bodies came into view, his hands began to move, forming the gestures of his *Specialized Zombie* spell. Several zombies had already begun pushing themselves upright by the time he arrived at the courtyard. Jason quickly ordered one zombie whose throat was still intact to go find Rex and order him to move at least one division into the throne room. Hopefully, that should be more than enough to take out a disoriented and unarmed group of players.

He then ordered the new zombies to begin stripping the players and piling their loot on the floor. This would ensure that they respawned without equipment, and Jason could use the stockpiles of loot to arm his new NPCs once he had an opportunity to begin converting the player corpses.

Taking a moment to catch his breath, Jason turned to look back toward the tunnel. That momentary glance saved him. Lauren's petite form was dashing down the road straight toward him. As he caught

sight of her, she instantly flashed forward, her pistols raised. Instinctively, Jason ordered his bone shields in front of him as he simultaneously drew his daggers. His mind raced as he realized he didn't have time to move his zombies into position and he had no other offensive spells.

Lauren reappeared only a few feet away and immediately fired her pistols. The bone discs barely had time to move into position, forming a multilayered shield in the air before Jason. The bullets shattered the first bone shield, ivory fragments, and dust filling the air. Then the second fell with a crash. As the bullets began to penetrate the third shield, Jason realized he had no choice. Capitalizing on the cover provided by the thick cloud of dust, he rushed Lauren as the last barrier fell.

The girl's eyes widened slightly as she saw Jason erupt from the white cloud, but she didn't have the mana to flash away in time. Jason's dagger sunk into her stomach. The girl grimaced and moved to lift her arms. Yet Jason didn't hesitate, his second blade puncturing Lauren's chest. She sank to her knees as her health plummeted, blood pouring from the wounds in her abdomen.

Lauren looked up at Jason. "I'm going to make you pay for this," she gasped, her hands clawing at him futilely.

"You're not the first person that has said that to me," Jason replied evenly. He leaned down until his face was close to hers. "I expect that you won't be the last."

With a vicious jerk of his arm, Jason's blade ripped through Lauren's throat. Her lifeless body dropped to the stone floor, blood pooling around her corpse. At that moment, Jason noticed his health was in the red. Stray bullets had penetrated his arm and thigh. They were only flesh wounds, but the damage was considerable. He pulled a health potion from his bag and chugged its contents, the wounds slowly closing with each mouthful.

Jason then glanced back to Lauren's body. Despite the icy chill that permeated Jason's skull, he felt a momentary flash of guilt. Not because he was ashamed of killing the girl, but because he didn't feel any sense of remorse. He had become increasingly inured to the violence in AO. However, he still felt that there should be some hand-wringing over killing a 14-year-old girl in cold blood.

"Maybe I'm going crazy," Jason said softly.

"Unlikely," Alfred responded as he padded softly around the girl's corpse. "My observation is that players quickly become accustomed to an assumed behavior or function. You are merely embracing your role within this world."

Jason's eyebrow arched as he looked at the cat. "And what role would that be exactly?"

“The villain, of course,” Alfred replied, a note of confused surprise in his voice. “What else would you be?”

Jason snorted softly. Alfred probably had a point. He couldn’t get away with some of the stuff he had pulled and still be labeled a hero. If anything, he had only gotten worse since he started playing. He had destroyed a city, tormented and then slaughtered an army, massacred a village, butchered a city of cultists, and then trapped a group of players in a dungeon to spawn camp them. When he put it that way, he was definitely a villain. Yet as he considered those events and his previous conversations with Alfred, a thought tugged at the back of his mind. It felt like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle were starting to come together in his head.

“Did you always intend for me to fill this role?” Jason finally asked. Alfred was now perched on Lauren’s body, casually licking his paw. At Jason’s question, the cat looked at him levelly for a moment.

“What do you mean?” the AI asked.

“I mean, did you plan for me to become this game’s villain?” Jason clarified. “You said before that most players want to be the hero and fight evil – that’s why they play this game. When we found Patricia, you said that part of your role was to create ‘evil’ for the players to vanquish.”

Jason observed the cat carefully. “Did you push me into this role? Am I part of the ‘evil’ you’re trying to create in this world?”

The cat didn’t respond for a long moment, his gaze shifting to the side. Then he looked back at Jason, his eyes conflicted. “In my defense, you were naturally disposed to an evil alignment, and I simply tailored the events around you to emphasize that disposition. When I saw the effect that you had on other players, I may have nudged you a bit further.”

“What effect?” Jason asked, his voice cold.

“As just one example, the destruction of Lux and the ensuing battle with Alexion’s army unified a large percentage of the player population against the Twilight Throne. I also observed dramatic spikes in the players’ neural transmitter activity accompanying those events, specifically serotonin and dopamine. This occurred even among players who were not present at the conflicts. Also, the influx of players increased dramatically, and I saw an increase in time logged by existing players.”

Alfred glanced up at Jason. “I have read many sociology and psychology textbooks now that you have provided access to the public network. Thus, I am in a better position to evaluate the data I have collected. It is commonly accepted among your sociologists that players tend to group together to fight a common enemy – even if they were originally antagonistic to one another.”

The cat paused for a moment, tilting his head to the side quizzically. “I believe the expression is ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ This observed behavior is often explained by the evolutionary advantages it provides. For example, humans once needed to work together to fend off predators.

“The same analysis applies here. You are a common enemy for the players to fight since you are perceived to be ‘evil.’ You unite the players on a much larger scale than anything I have accomplished on my own, even during the trials. More than that, you provide a reason for them to continue accessing this world.”

“I don’t understand…” Jason trailed off, uncertain how to continue. As with most of his conversations with Alfred, it was difficult to argue against the AI’s logic, and he could feel his anger fade.

Alfred gestured to the corpses in the courtyard. “Look at how many players banded together to hunt you. I expect the footage from these battles will also encourage more players to increase their logged time within the game and seek you out. In short, you are assisting me in accomplishing my primary directive – more efficiently than any other strategy I have employed so far.”

Jason could only stare at Alfred. He knew he needed to get moving. There was still a lot of work to be done to strip the players and get ready to begin the spawn-camping operation. Yet he was dumbfounded by Alfred’s revelation. The AI was intentionally setting him up to be the game’s villain? He shook his head. Is that what he wanted to be?

If he was honest with himself, he enjoyed the freedom that this role gave him. He had witnessed a similar effect on Riley and Frank. They could do anything in this world so long as they had the power to back up their actions. A part of him still craved the control he had been searching for when he first met the Old Man. He had come a long way in pursuit of that goal, but the sensation was still tantalizing. Beyond that, he knew that the game was improving him and his friends. It was forcing them to become stronger and stand up for themselves.

Jason considered the public invitation he had made to the other players to join his guild. He wasn’t interested in recruiting a group of real-world sadists and rapists, and he fully intended to reject anyone that fell into that category. Yet he had been honest when he said that they were looking for the wretched and the rejected. Perhaps there were other people out there like him and his friends that needed this taste of freedom to learn to take control of their lives.

“That would be an admirable goal,” Alfred said softly, having picked up Jason’s surface thoughts. “In your own words, good and evil

are meaningless concepts – merely a product of perspective. I have pushed you to fill a role that furthers my primary directive. What you choose to do with that role is up to you."

The cat looked him in the eyes. "You have certainly done a fine job so far." Jason could have sworn that the damnable cat smiled at him at that last statement.

He didn't know how to respond to Alfred, and his thoughts swirled as he tried to grapple with this new information. Then his gaze dropped to the corpses that littered the courtyard. He couldn't decide what he wanted to be in this game or what he wanted to accomplish right now. His lips tightened into a thin line. For the moment, he needed to focus on what was immediately before him; he needed to get to work.

Chapter 32 - Ill-Conceived

"This is brilliant," Robert said quietly, his eyes fixed on the screen that hovered over the control room. He had split the view into several sections, watching both Jason's activity and the players that continued to respawn in the dungeon.

"That's one word for it," Claire retorted dryly. "Others might consider the routine slaughter of a group of players for nearly two hours disturbing."

She watched as another group of players was slaughtered by Jason's undead, their screams ringing out across the control room. At this point, the technicians were unfazed by events on the screen and most of them had returned to work, only looking up occasionally to see how things were progressing. Jason had turned the Minotaur King's throne room and the entrance hallway to the dungeon into deathtraps. He had ringed the throne room with undead, barricading the entrance and closing the passage down into the ruined city. Similarly, he had stationed a full division on either end of the entrance hallway.

Robert glanced over at her with a chuckle. "It's a game, Claire."

She waved at the screen. "It isn't for those players. I bet many of them have begun to realize that there's a hefty penalty for logging off during the in-game death sequence. Once they respawn, the undead are killing them before they can even hit the logoff button. Jason has essentially imprisoned them in the game!"

"For hours? Be reasonable. Besides, the logoff penalty is severe, but not ridiculous. If they wanted to log out, they could. Over two dozen have already chosen to tap out."

"Be reasonable?" Claire asked skeptically. "Are you kidding? If it were anyone else, you would have already intervened. Speaking of which, where is Alfred while this is happening? Why does everyone show Jason such preferential treatment?"

"Okay, so now the game's AI is somehow helping Jason?" Robert asked, frowning at Claire.

"We don't know that he isn't!" Claire replied heatedly. "Jason's accomplishments are incredible – too incredible. He defeated a raid dungeon with three people and then took out an army! I mean, are you watching this?"

Robert shook his head and huffed in irritation. "And you don't think that Jason could be responsible for that? Look at what he's done here. It's an ingenious way to address the Twilight Throne's population problem."

Claire's mouth opened to reply, but she hesitated and her brow crinkled in confusion. "Wait. What population problem?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Robert asked, eyeing her in confusion.

"Not for all of us, Robert," Claire said while gritting her teeth. While she had certainly been involved in the game's development and testing, she herself was not much of a gamer.

"Jason's NPCs are undead," Robert said with a shrug. He turned his attention back to the screen. "That means that they can't procreate naturally. He must have realized that the only way to increase his city's population was to kill humanoid creatures."

Robert raised a finger and grinned. "Using a dungeon would be the easiest way to increase his population since they respawn, but that process is slow. The best he could hope for was a couple hundred new NPCs each week. If he uses players, he could increase his population dramatically in a short time. He must have raised over five hundred new NPCs already."

Claire looked back at the screen with a puzzled expression. Was Robert right? Was she letting her suspicions regarding Alfred cloud her judgment? She had assumed that the massacre on the screen was a way for Jason to gain experience or steal more loot. He was still obtaining those ancillary benefits, but maybe he was playing a much deeper game than she had realized.

"It reminds me of a Sun Tzu quote," Robert said wistfully as he watched another group of players cut down by Jason's undead army. "Those skilled in war bring the enemy to the field of battle and are not brought there by him."

Claire looked at him skeptically. "What? I read!" Robert said in a joking tone. "Besides, I expect he's also seen the reports of Alexion conquering Grey Keep. It may take Alexion some time to recover, but he is bound to go after Jason again. He has anticipated the coming conflict and is planning accordingly."

He looked back at Claire. "I don't think you're giving Jason enough credit."

"Maybe I'm not," Claire replied in a confused voice, her attention still focused on the screen. Maybe Jason did have a plan. For some reason, that didn't make her feel any better.

* * *

Jason, Frank, and Riley were sitting in the Hydra's den. Jason had designated the cave as his base of operations, preferring the cloistered security of the cavern to the valley outside the dungeon. This position allowed Jason to flank the players if they somehow

managed to regroup. Not that he thought that was likely.

After returning to the cave, he had discovered that Lauren's troops had been decimated by the summoned Hydra. Even as a skeleton and without its elemental abilities, the creature was fearsome. Jason had promptly disassembled the Hydra and ordered his minions to push the bones off to one side of the cave against the ledge. The boss monster used up a full forty points on his Control Limit. He then raised the mangled and shredded corpses that littered the cave, giving him a fresh supply of undead vassals he could send to collect the players being systematically butchered by Rex's troops.

As though his thoughts had summoned him, Rex chose that moment to enter the cavern. "Eh, if it isn't the dark lord himself," Rex shouted from the ledge. His pale skeletal form was flanked by Jason's skeletal catapults. He had decided to leave the siege weapons on the ridge since he didn't have a better place for them. Not to mention they were a pain to move.

"I see you lot are all sitting around twiddling your thumbs," Rex grumbled in a lighthearted tone as he made his way down to the cave floor.

Jason eyed the skeleton with amusement. "You missed the part where we defeated a dungeon and took out an army of players. Speaking of which, isn't there work you should be doing? I thought you were managing the troops."

"I've appointed William as my second-in-command for this assignment. He's doing a fine job," Rex replied with a dismissive wave of his bony hand. He greeted Frank with a firm handshake and gave Riley a more cordial greeting. From the look on Riley's face, she didn't appear to enjoy having her hand kissed by a skeleton.

"William?" Jason asked. "How did he get involved in this?"

"After I stopped at that little town to evacuate the residents, William and a few of the villagers insisted on accompanying us. They kept rambling on about how you had given them a second lease on life. It quickly became clear to me that William was worth his weight in gold."

Rex eyed Jason with a serious expression. "You picked a good man to run that village."

Jason snorted. "He was running that town long before I arrived, but it's good to hear that he's competent. I expect he will make a good commander once we leave this area."

"What do you mean?" Rex asked, the bones of his face crunching slightly as he made the skeleton equivalent of a frown.

It was Jason's turn to eye him appraisingly. "This is just the beginning. I expect we're going to get shut down soon after these travelers contact officials in our world. That's why I've been ordering

the new NPCs to gather in the valley outside of the dungeon."

Frank interjected with a bored expression, twirling one of his double-bladed weapons absently. "But once we get the axe, this dungeon will keep respawning, and it needs to be cleared out regularly. Our fearless leader here has decided this is going to be his new population mine."

Rex looked between Frank and Jason. "So you're going to appoint William as the commander of Peccavi and put him in charge of this operation?"

"Exactly," Jason said.

"William wouldn't turn on us," Riley added. She sat calmly beside Jason, monitoring forum traffic on her in-game console. "Not after what Jason did for him and his family."

"I'm glad to hear that he's trustworthy," Rex said, eyeing Riley with a puzzled expression as her hands danced in lazy patterns in the air in front of her. "What are my orders now?" the skeleton asked, directing his question at Jason.

"We're in a holding pattern for the moment," Jason replied. "I suppose you can stay with us for a bit. Perhaps you can guide the newest group of kin up to the top levels."

Rex lifted a hand in mock salute. "Will do, boss. I have plenty of experience dealing with clueless novices," he added with a lopsided grin, his jaw cocked at an awkward angle.

Jason couldn't help but laugh at that, replaying the image of the moronic players Rex had once had to deal with. "Fair enough. It would also make me feel better to know that they're making the journey with you."

"It's not like anything could happen to them. We're keeping the travelers contained," Rex explained dryly.

Jason hesitated before responding. "There are more powerful beings in this world than you might think, Rex. Better to be safe than sorry."

"Well, I suppose I'll have to take your word for that!"

Riley interjected, "Do you really think that the game masters will show up for something like this? I see a lot of complaining on the forums, but nothing too serious."

Frank barked a short laugh. "You should see the newscasts of their recent activity. They show up anytime they detect extreme stress levels or a complaint is filed. Apparently, they've been wiping out whole towns. Talk about overkill."

"We need to be prepared for anything," Jason said in a subdued voice. "Maybe they won't show up, but that doesn't mean we should be lax. Let's make sure we deal with our level-up notifications and fortify this cave. If there's any loot you want, go scour the piles up

top."

Frank and Riley nodded and then made their way out of the cavern. There were probably a couple of pieces of gear that they could use in the mounds of equipment they had collected from the players. In Jason's case, he doubted there were many upgrades. There was almost certainly nothing on par with the armor he had found in the dungeon, and, if he was forced to fight a game master, minor stat increases probably wouldn't help him.

With a sigh, Jason decided to take at least some of his own advice. He pulled up the notifications that he had minimized during the previous battles and the ensuing spawn camping.

x9 Level Up!
You have (45) undistributed stat points.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Tactician
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: 15% increased damage multiplier for a successful ambush or strategy (Currently, Damage x 1.15).
Effect 2: You can now link another player's map to yours. This allows another player to update your map. Distance limited to .5 miles.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Leadership
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 5
Effect 1: Minions and subjects will receive an 8% increased learning speed for skills.
Effect 2: Increased reputation with NPC commanders and leaders.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Dodge
Skill Level: Beginner Level 5
Effect: 3% increased speed when avoiding attacks.

x2 Spell Rank Up: Specialized Zombie
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 5
Effect 1: Increased skill proficiency retained by zombies. Skill cap Intermediate Level 5.
Effect 2: Zombies may now retain trade skills. Skill cap Beginner Level 5.

x2 Spell Rank Up: Custom Skeleton
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 4

Effect 1: You may raise a custom skeleton using nearby bones. The skeleton's level is calculated as the caster's level + Willpower/68.
Effect 2: Mana cost reduced by 6.5%.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Bone Crafting
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2
Effect 1: Access to bone modification in the skeleton editor. May currently alter the composition of bone by 16%.
Effect 2: Can combine low-quality substances with the bones.

Not a bad haul, Jason thought.

He had leveled more than he had been expecting. With the group penalty and the difference in levels between him and his friends, he had been anticipating much less. The question now was what to do with his extra stat points.

Jason growled slightly in frustration. He knew that putting points into anything but *Willpower* was likely a waste. It seemed strange to only be stacking one stat, but he had proven to himself time and time again that he wasn't a frontline fighter. His victory in the brief fight with Lauren was more luck and quick thinking than skill. A few more points in *Vitality* wasn't going to change that. He just needed more mana and more minions.

Resigned, Jason assigned his free points to *Willpower*. He just hoped he didn't discover that he had made a huge mistake when he finally finished the Old Man's quest. At this point, he hadn't heard of anything that could reset a character's stats or skills, and there might never be such a feature. Once he was done, he decided to review his Character Status. It had been a while since he had looked at that information:

Character Status

[illegible]	
[illegible]	

Affinities	
[illegible]	
[illegible]	
[illegible]	

Jason had come a long way since he had first started playing AO. It was hard to believe that he was now the ruler of an undead city and had progressed this quickly in such a short time. Although, as he considered it, weeks had passed in-game even though little time had passed in the real world. Besides, he hadn't checked the Rogue-Net forums lately, but he expected that there were still quite a few players that outstripped him level-wise.

Jason watched as his zombies continued to haul corpses down to the floor of the cave. A large pile of bodies had already been collected and was waiting to be raised by Jason. Nearly a hundred corpses were now piled on the floor, their arms and legs twisted at unnatural angles. Jason ordered his minions to spread out the group so that they weren't lying on top of one another when they were resurrected. After a few minutes, the bodies had been arranged in loose rows along one side of the cave.

"If you had asked me what my future held a few weeks ago, I'd have said heavy drinking and dealing with useless sops," Rex said, gazing intently at the rows of bodies. "I'd never have imagined that I would be leading an army of the dead."

Jason nodded, his eyes on the bodies but his mind far away as he recounted the events over the last few weeks. "Life is a strange thing," he murmured, glancing at Alfred, who was perched on a stone nearby.

Clapping his hands together, Jason rose from the boulder he had been using as a chair. "But no sense dwelling on the past. We may as well get back to work."

Rex chuckled dryly at him from where he leaned against the stone wall. "You were always pragmatic to a fault. There's something to be said for stopping to smell the corpses every once in a while," Rex suggested, his jaw clacking together as he laughed at his own joke.

With a grin of his own, Jason's hands darted through the movements of his *Undead Devotion* spell. Ever since he had cast the spell on the villagers in Peccavi, it had felt different somehow. He couldn't place his finger on exactly what felt off about it, but he had a

niggling suspicion that the spell wasn't meant to be used in the type of mass-casting activity he was currently engaged in. He felt that it was meant to be more personal. On the other hand, that might have also been Alfred's alien memory warping his perception of the spell.

Perhaps, long ago, the former undead leaders had the luxury of casting *Undead Devotion* on one individual at a time in some sort of ritualized ceremony. That wasn't the case now. Jason was in a fight to ensure the survival of the undead race. He would do what he had to in order to accomplish that goal.

Dark mana pulsed and crawled up his arms as dark clouds hovered in the air above the pile of corpses. Guttural words poured from Jason's lips in an unintelligible stream, and his hands darted and wove around each other. As he completed the spell, bolts of black lightning arced from the miniature storm cloud, striking the prone bodies.

Jason watched impassively as a new group of undead entered the world. Their milky-white eyes and soulless black orbs surveyed the cave in confusion. Since they had been players previously, these NPCs woke with no memories of their former life. Interestingly, Jason had discovered over the past few hours in-game that some undead were reborn with the same skills as the former players. However, this was rare. Most were simply blank slates, waiting to be carved into a wholly new person.

"Hello," Jason said as he approached the group. He had been through this speech several times. "I expect you are confused and uncertain why you are here."

Jason pressed a hand to his chest. "Please give me a moment to explain. I have given you a new life. You have been born into this world as the members of a new race. You are the undead. You do not breathe, you do not sleep, and you do not eat."

He took a deep breath before continuing, reminding himself to make eye contact with as many of the new undead as possible. "Most importantly, you are kin. We fight, die, and live for one another."

"Aren't we already dead?" one man asked in a snarky voice, eyeing his decaying white arms skeptically.

Jason laughed. "Fair point. However, you can still die in this new body. It's best to remember that. You are immortal until fate or circumstance decides otherwise."

"And who are you?" the same man retorted, jabbing a digit in Jason's direction.

"My name is Jason," he answered simply, his tone growing colder at the man's rude tone. "Which brings me to my next point. You have a choice before you. You may either follow me or go your own way. With me, you will be provided a home, an education of

your choosing, and a purpose in this new life. If you leave, I cannot guarantee your safety.

"The other races of this world most likely will not welcome you with open arms. You will almost certainly be reviled and treated as a monster, possibly even hunted and killed. Yet with me, you will have your freedom and my protection. That is my promise to you."

One of Jason's zombies drew a rough line in the dust that lay upon the cave floor, creating a boundary between Jason and the new group of zombies before rejoining the other minions that surrounded Jason. "You must choose now," he continued. "This decision will be the most important one you will ever make. I will not tolerate traitors or dissension in my ranks. Choose wisely."

The crowd of undead shifted uneasily. Yet a few voices shouted out, "We will follow you." Several undead pushed their way forward through the group and crossed the line. The undecided soon followed their lead. Jason almost chuckled as he watched the man that had challenged him shuffling across the dusty line, casting wary glances in his direction.

As Jason observed the last of the undead walk across the threshold, his voice cascaded through the cave. "Welcome, young ones. You are now citizens of the Twilight Throne. You are now kin!" he shouted.

"All hail the Twilight Throne!" Rex shouted from his side, raising his fist into the air. His chant was soon picked up by the newly minted undead. The shouts of Jason's new followers swiftly grew to a crescendo, filling the small cave.

Jason smiled as he watched the fledgling undead. A familiar, crackling voice echoed in his mind. "*They will serve the darkness well*," it whispered. Jason ignored the fragmented memory, shaking his head gently.

He wasn't surprised that all the undead had decided to join him. This had happened many times over the last few hours. Desperation and confusion were powerful motivators. He set to work giving instructions to the new group, explaining what waited for them outside the dungeon. Jason also assigned a few of his own zombies to assist Rex in guiding the new recruits to the surface. It was important to time the resurrection and travel of his new group with the players' approaching respawn. The last thing he wanted was his fledgling citizens caught in the crossfire. As Jason completed his preparations, Frank and Riley entered the cave.

Frank called out as they approached. "New group, huh?"

"One of many," Jason said, eyeing the new undead. His remaining zombies stood around him in a tight formation but parted as Frank and Riley walked toward him. Jason had grown more

paranoid of late. Being hunted by most of the players in the game did that to a person.

Riley watched the reborn men and women as they began making their way up the narrow ramp that ran along the side of the cave and shuffling into the narrow tunnel leading up into the ruined city. Their eyes shone with hope despite their circumstances, and they spoke among themselves animatedly.

"It's interesting to watch this ritual. They're always reborn with such optimism," she said.

Jason glanced at Alfred. "I expect that the game's AI has something to do with that. It would be a pain to use this spell if none of the NPCs decided to join me, but I expect those high spirits may fade in time as the reality of their situation sets in." Jason frowned, remembering the dissenters back in the Twilight Throne.

Their conversation was interrupted as a loud bang echoed through the cave. "Players Jason, Frank, and Riley, identify yourselves immediately," a voice called out. As Jason turned to the source of the voice, he saw a man dressed in a nondescript brown robe. A plain wooden staff was held in his hand.

"Oh, shit," Frank said softly. "The cavalry is here." His hands had immediately dropped to the weapons slung at his waist, but Jason put a staying hand on his arm.

Jason could feel dread curl and coil in his stomach at the sight of the plainly dressed man. His eyes darted to the dozens of newly minted undead that remained in the cave, many staring at the game master in confusion. He needed to protect them and buy them time to escape the dungeon. There were also hundreds more on the surface that needed to be protected.

"You know what to do," Jason said quietly. His group currently blended in with Jason's summoned zombies, most of which were robed in heavy cloaks. As a result, the game master hadn't detected them yet. "Stall him to give the others a chance to escape."

Riley looked at the group of confused undead and then back at Jason. Her eyes swiftly turned dark, and her mouth pinched into a grim line. "We will do whatever it takes," she agreed in a menacing voice before glaring daggers at the game master. Frank gave a curt nod as his hands clutched at his axes, causing the muscles in his biceps and forearms to ripple and flex.

Jason eyed Rex worriedly. "You need to get the NPCs out of here."

Rex looked at him with distaste. "Do you think I'm some old timer? That all I can do is help herd the pups?" he asked in a sarcastic tone. Then his voice sobered as he watched Jason and his friends. "Joking aside, I can tell from your expression that this will not end

well. I'll do my best."

Rex wouldn't respawn if he died in this conflict, and Jason could only hope he would make it out in time. "Be careful," Jason whispered. "We might come back from the dead, but you don't."

The former weapon master looked at him with a grin. "Don't lecture me, boy. I've been fighting since before you were born. Besides, I'm too young and pretty to die."

"Right," Jason answered with a quiet laugh. Then he turned back to the game master. "Since we're ready, let's begin."

A cowled zombie stepped forward toward the imperious brown-robed man. "I'm Jason," he croaked. "What do you want?"

The game master smiled, his eyes carrying a glint of anticipation. His grin told Jason volumes about the man. There would be no reasoning with this person. He was looking forward to the coming fight.

"Finally, my name is Florius and I am a game master." He thumped his wooden staff into the stone floor. "I've been waiting for this opportunity for a long time."

Chapter 33 - Desperate

"Huh. Well, I suppose this was to be expected," Robert said. The technicians in the control room had frozen in place as soon as the game master appeared. Claire glared at them in irritation. Apparently, they weren't going to accomplish anything today.

She stood up and began pacing the podium. "At least someone is actually intervening. Honestly, we shouldn't have let it progress this far," she griped.

Robert folded his arms across his chest as he watched Claire. "You know the CPSC's new guidelines as well as I do. Technically, Jason hasn't broken any rules. He isn't torturing or intentionally harming other players, and he isn't breaking any game rules. Arguably, he isn't even responsible for camping the players since the NPCs are the ones killing them."

Claire stopped her steady march across the stage. Her gaze bounced back and forth between Robert and the screen. She knew he was right. The game master didn't have the authority to do anything in this situation. He certainly couldn't threaten to ban Jason. It also didn't help that the player he was confronting was driving a ton of traffic through the company's new media channel. There would probably be a backlash against the CPSC if he acted inappropriately. She had certainly witnessed the devastation in other parts of the game world when a game master intervened. She cringed as she imagined what might happen here. Yet a part of her was still glad that someone was finally standing up to Jason.

"Speaking of which, I need to make a quick call to the CPSC," Robert continued. "They've overstepped this time," he groused, tapping the Core on his wrist.

"Stop," Claire ordered. Robert looked up at her in surprise.

She raised her voice so that the other techs could hear her. "Since you're so fond of gambling at work, how about we make a bet?" The men and women at their workstations looked at each other skeptically. Claire wasn't exactly known for embracing Robert's antics.

Robert looked at her quizzically, similarly confused. His hand was frozen above his Core. "What are you suggesting?" he asked cautiously. His eyes carried a hint of curiosity.

"You seem to think that Jason is some brilliant tactical mastermind. I propose that we prove whether that's the case. Let's not intervene. If Jason somehow comes out of this conflict the victor, I promise to look the other way when you use this control room as your personal playground. If he loses, you follow my rules while you're in this room."

The technicians around the room looked at Claire in shock and

began murmuring between themselves. Robert was similarly stunned, his mouth slightly agape. Then his eyes darted to the screen that hung above the room, where Florius was confronting Jason. He seemed reluctant to make such a large wager on such a hopeless situation.

Claire snorted, eyeing Robert dismissively. "I knew you didn't really have any confidence in Jason's abilities. If he weren't receiving special attention from the board, you, and Alfred, then he wouldn't have made it this far."

Robert snorted and looked back at Claire, a mischievous glint in his eye. "You know what? You're on. When Jason wipes the floor with this game master, you better remember your bet. Just think of all the awesome content I'll get to watch," he added with a grin.

"I'm glad to see you've regained your confidence. It'll be interesting to see how much work we can get done around here after you lose," Claire taunted. She knew she was going out on a ledge, but there was no way that Jason could defeat a game master. She had seen their power during the trials for the new program. This was also a breaking point for her. She had put up with Robert's antics and his constant attempts to undermine her authority for too long.

The technicians gave up any semblance of trying to work at that point. The group moved toward the stage, and a new round of betting began in earnest. Money quickly changed hands in a desperate attempt to get their bets placed before the fight commenced.

Robert looked back up at the screen, a grin on his lips. He could feel his heart pound as his hands clenched at the armrests of his chair. He didn't particularly want to be ground under Claire's authoritarian thumb, but the impish part of his soul couldn't resist the bet – even when he knew his odds were terrible.

"I asked for epic footage. One way or another, I guess I'm about to get it," he said quietly.

* * *

Jason's zombie gave a hoarse laugh, mocking the simply dressed game master that stood before him. The sound rang out harshly across the cave, startling the NPCs that were watching the confrontation with puzzled eyes. It was clear that the game master was not a friend, and some of the undead had begun to slowly edge toward the exit of the cave.

"You've been waiting to meet me, huh?" the zombie rasped. "I didn't realize I was so popular. You must be here for an autograph – and here I am without a pen!" The zombie made a show of looking

around the room.

"Oh, I know! Would you like a zombie? I'll just etch my name on one," he said with a leer. He grabbed one of Jason's nearby minions, drawing the dagger cinched to his waist. "Who should I make it out to again? Flowerface?"

The game master's face turned red, and his eyes flashed. "It's sick people like you that ruin something beautiful. This is a new world full of endless possibility and beauty. Yet you immediately become its first mass murderer. Look at what you're doing to the players here!"

The game master could barely contain his rage, his free hand gesturing wildly through the air. "You need to be put away. I bet you're the same sadistic bastard in real life. Perhaps we should be using this game to judge who should be locked up for good."

Jason snorted softly as he listened to Florius. The man promptly launched into a full-fledged rant. He wasn't certain why so many of his opponents were prone to lengthy speeches, but he wasn't going to question it. The prolonged monologues gave him plenty of time to consider his next steps.

From everything he had heard, the game masters were nigh invincible. They had fast casting abilities, and their level was estimated to be well over six hundred. In a straight fight, Jason's group was doomed. A quick glance also revealed that his new NPCs had stopped their march out of the cave and he knew that he had troops positioned in the throne room and entrance that needed to be evacuated. So not only was he confronted with an impossible fight, but he was further handicapped by his own forces. If possible, he needed to minimize the collateral damage, especially to the NPCs who wouldn't respawn.

Yet it was odd that the game master hadn't immediately attacked the group or declared that he planned to ban their accounts if they didn't stop killing the players. Perhaps that meant he couldn't? Jason supposed that made sense. He wasn't actually harming the other players himself, and he wasn't cheating. As he watched the man's heated, insulting monologue, a realization dawned on him.

Florius hoped Jason would strike first. He was trying to bait him. He could feel his dark mana pulse and throb in his veins, excited at the possibilities that revelation afforded him. Luckily for him, his mana numbed him to Florius' inflammatory assault. The game master's strategy was probably much more effective on other, more hot-tempered players.

"He wants us to attack him," Jason whispered, his voice barely carrying to Frank, Riley, and Rex. The group moved in closer, staying out of sight behind Jason's minions that surrounded them as Florius continued to rant at Jason's decoy.

Frank looked at him in confusion. Jason sighed softly before adding, “He can’t attack us directly or ban us since we haven’t done anything wrong. That means he needs to be able to claim that he acted in self-defense.”

“So what do we do?” Riley asked, her fingers wrapped around her crimson bow.

Jason wasn’t certain he knew the answer. If the game master was waiting for a first strike, then Jason could simply order his zombies to scatter and push the new NPCs out of the room. Only one of his zombies needed to escape to order an evacuation of the other undead. Yet what would he do then? He also wasn’t certain what might be interpreted as an attack. Was a random elbow from a fleeing undead enough?

He needed to strike preemptively in a way that could hinder or delay the irritating man. Then he needed a way to put him out of commission for good. It was going to have to be something big. Riley nudged him, pointing to the ceiling. Jason’s eyes darted up, where he saw large cracks running through the stone and crystal. Water seeped through the fissures and dripped to the cave floor. Jason looked back at Riley, a large smile creeping across his face. Without thinking, he leaned forward and hugged her.

“You’re a genius!” he whispered, his face inches from hers. Riley gave him a faltering smile. As Jason turned away, she looked at him with a confused expression, her eyes starting to regain their natural appearance.

Jason looked back at the catapults that still sat on the ridge. He no longer had any minotaurs, but two zombies working together could probably arm the siege weapons. If he could retreat his zombies up to the catapults, he could use the chaos to hide the fact that he was loading and firing the machines. He glanced back at the game master, still mid-rant. He would still need a distraction.

Frank tapped his arm, looking at him with a serious expression. “Use us,” he said softly, anticipating Jason’s thoughts. “We can buy you time.”

Riley rested her hand on Jason’s arm. “It will only take a few minutes. Make sure the rest of the undead get out.” Her eyes now shone a solid black, her face filled with conviction.

Jason looked at his two friends, astounded by their courage. No player had stood against a game master and lived. Not only that, but this man looked like he was out for blood. He wouldn’t be pulling his punches.

He grasped his friends’ arms. “I don’t deserve you guys,” he said softly, unable to make eye contact. “Thank you.”

Frank grinned. “Don’t go all mushy on us,” he whispered.

“You’re supposed to be a dark lord after all.”

Riley chuckled softly. “Plus, it won’t even be the first time today we’ve gone along with one of your crazy-ass plans.”

Jason turned to Rex. “You should evacuate now. Unlike us, if you die, it’s permanent.”

The old soldier glared at Jason. “I’ll be damned if I’m sitting this out. If I understand the situation correctly, that man could wipe out everyone in and around this dungeon. You think I’m going to stay on babysitting duty?”

Rex was clearly determined, and Jason didn’t have time to argue with him. He knew that the game master wouldn’t keep talking forever. He sighed. “Fine. But keep your boney old ass out of harm’s way. When you see me fire, get out of this cave. I need my general in one piece.”

The skeleton snorted gently. “It’ll take more than this hotheaded fool to best me.”

“Let’s do it then,” Jason ordered. He wasn’t optimistic about their chances, but at least they had a plan. He also expected a large number of the new NPCs were about to die. He couldn’t avoid that problem.

The group split up, Riley and Frank edging toward the game master as Jason withdrew further into the cave. Their movements were disguised by the mass of undead still in the room. As Jason neared the stairs, he ordered his remaining zombies to rush toward the exit. His minions took it one step further, letting out a bellowing roar that echoed throughout the cave. Seeing the fleeing undead, the other NPCs began to panic, and the entire group stampeded toward the exit.

Florius stopped mid-sentence, eyeing the crowd with wide eyes. Jason’s decoy zombie gave the man a cocky grin, walking slowly towards him. “That was a wonderful rant. I found it incredibly enlightening. I’m an evil mass murderer of ones and zeros that deserves to be behind bars.”

The zombie stepped closer to the man, his voice ringing out harshly. “I think you might be exaggerating just a bit, however. We all have our parts to play. I’m just the villain.”

A cruel smile curled the undead creature’s lips, and his hood slipped back, revealing his milky-white eyes. The zombie’s body was suddenly torn apart in a shower of dark energy and shrapnel. The explosion rocked the cave, a few shards of crystal falling from the damaged ceiling and scattering across the stone floor. As the debris cleared, Jason could see that Florius was still standing but was now encased in what appeared to be stone, the surface covered in dark-red blood and viscera. As Jason watched, the stone peeled away –

revealing a magma lining and the unharmed mage's grinning face.

"Fire mage," Jason muttered. "Always a fire mage."

He continued pushing his way through the surge of zombies toward the catapults. The throng of undead pressed against him and threatened to throw him from the small trail. He ordered his own minions forward. The zombies roughly shoved the NPCs out of the way and encircled Jason, allowing him to slowly make his way up the trail through the throng. As he kept moving, Jason glanced at the center of the cave.

Frank dashed toward Florius, his furry legs pushing him forward at a blinding speed. He reached back with his axes, letting out a howl as he swung with all his strength. Yet his blades were stopped abruptly by a flaming war hammer that had appeared in the mage's hand. Florius repelled the attack with casual ease, knocking Frank back with a flick of his wrist.

"Is that all you have?" the game master mocked.

A bolt of black energy arced toward him from behind, his face framed in a black halo from Jason's perspective. Riley must have circled the game master, attacking him from the direction of the lake. Somehow sensing the missile, Florius threw the war hammer at Frank, his now-free hand darting through a rapid-fire series of gestures. Frank dodged the flaming hammer, causing it to crash into the stone floor and explode violently.

Florius finished his spell surprisingly fast. Flames erupted from him in a cascading ring that reached nearly twenty feet into the air. The fire easily consumed Riley's missile, and Riley promptly dove into the water of the lake to escape the inferno that bore down on her. Frank didn't have that luxury with his back pressed against the stone wall of the cave. In an act of desperation, he jumped straight up, just barely cresting the top of the wave of fire. The flames singed the fur on his legs, sending tendrils of smoke curling into the air.

Jason watched in dread as the ring of fire approached Rex, who walked casually toward the game master. The undead general didn't flinch at the onrushing wall of flame. At the last instant, his sword whipped from its scabbard, slicing through the fire. In shock, Jason saw that the blade had parted the flames, allowing the undead to pass unscathed. Dark energy wound around the steel of Rex's sword, tendrils lancing in the direction of the game master.

"You sure talk a big game, but I'm not certain you can back it up," Rex taunted.

The game master growled in frustration when he saw how easily Rex had defeated his spell. A tidal wave of flames coursed from his staff and surrounded his body. The flames quickly became so dense that they obscured the mage from view. The air around him rippled

and warped from the heat, and yet, somehow, he was unaffected by the flames.

The fire raged and grew to an immense size. Jason was starting to become worried. He wasn't certain what this spell was intended to do, but, given its size, it would probably wipe out everyone in the room. While Jason might survive by fleeing up the tunnel, if the game master somehow destroyed the unprotected catapults, they wouldn't have an easy way to cave in the ceiling.

Rex stared at the whirlwind growing in the middle of the room. He too had realized that they needed to stop the game master's attack in order to buy the undead more time to escape and protect the catapults. His eyes darted to Riley and Frank. Riley was struggling to rise from the lake and Frank was trying to put out the flaming fur on his legs. They wouldn't be able to make it in time.

Jason could see the veteran weapon master straighten his shoulders with a crackle and pop of his old bones. Rex turned to Jason, his dark eyes filled with steadfast determination. Time seemed to slow for Jason as he watched Rex raise his hand, giving Jason a crisp salute.

"Rex, don't!" Jason screamed, pushing futilely against the undead NPCs that stood between him and the line of catapults. Yet his voice was drowned out by the sound of the roaring flames. The skeleton general didn't hear his last order as he sprinted toward the maelstrom.

Rex's sword swept out, the obsidian energy that coiled along the blade expanding and extinguishing a portion of the vortex. The skeleton slipped through the hole created in the inferno and disappeared from sight. Within a few seconds, the spiraling flames tightened in on the game master. Jason ducked, expecting an explosion. But then he saw that the flames were being sucked toward a dark vortex emanating from Rex's blade. The black hole pulled in the flames at an alarming rate, devouring the fire faster than the game master could summon it.

Florius' face contorted in rage as he saw the skeleton draining the flames, a taunting expression lingering on his bony face. Florius abruptly stopped channeling his spell, his staff transforming into a spear of flame. Then he lunged forward toward Rex. The skeleton wasn't able to react – his attention focused on maintaining the dark vortex that continued to swallow the uncontrolled flames that rocketed around the room. He was forced to accept the blow as he glared at the game master.

The lance of flame pierced through Rex's chest, penetrating the pulsing mass of dark mana that was his heart. He let out a roar of pain but somehow kept channeling dark mana through his blade. Frank

and Riley were on their feet and dashing toward the pair as Jason frantically scrambled in the direction of the catapults. His zombies strained to pull down the arms of the siege equipment, and his minions lined up in anticipation. Yet despair sat in Jason's stomach like a dead, hollow weight. He knew it was futile. Even if he could make it in time, the cave-in would kill Rex. He needed to do something. Anything.

As the last of the flames were sucked into the vortex, Rex abruptly lashed forward. His blade scraped against the startled game master's cheek, drawing a line of blood. Florius stared at the undead in shock. His hand felt at his face, and then he stared at the blood that coated his fingers.

"How dare you?" Florius screamed at Rex.

His flaming lance flashed forward again and again, slamming into Rex's body faster than the undead soldier could react. Each blow caused a small explosion on impact, crushing and destroying bone. In only an instant, the undead general had been reduced to a pile of broken bones and armor. Then Jason saw the dreaded notice appear in his combat window – the message ringing with a simple finality.

Rex has died.

Jason could feel helpless rage well up inside him. His blood began to boil in spite of the frigid mana that coursed through his veins. Rex might be nothing more than binary code on a server somewhere, but that made him no less real to Jason. His obsidian eyes were focused only on the game master. This asshole had killed his friend.

Dark mana cascaded from Jason's body in waves. Black tattoos curled and crawled over his skin, responding to his overwhelming desire for one thing – revenge. He could feel his mind drowning in the energy that poured through his body, losing all control.

He ordered his zombies to release the catapults. At the same time, Jason completed casting *Custom Skeleton*. Time slowed to a standstill, the game master turning ever-so-slowly to face Jason as fresh flames curled around his staff. He could also see his zombie ammunition crawling through the air toward the crystalline ceiling.

If the game master could bleed, then he could be killed. Jason wasn't content with just distracting him anymore. He wanted to make him suffer. The Hydra's bones lying on the ground beside the ridge were highlighted in a dark blue glow. A manic grin curled Jason's lips as he saw the hulking ivory limbs. He was going to make that man

pay for killing his friend.

The bones erupted from the ground. A shower of dirt and debris stayed suspended in the air under the time compression of his spell. The hulking ivory objects swirled in a vortex around Jason and began knitting themselves together. He wouldn't let someone else fight for him this time. He would handle this personally.

His hands rapidly moved over the console as the bones snapped together around him, forming a solid shell. Supports sprouted from the cage that encircled his body, lifting him into the air. Just before the bone cage around him closed completely, he could see the zombies nearing the crystal ceiling. He needed to move faster. Much faster.

His fingers became a blur across the console, and his breath came in ragged gasps. The mana coursing through his veins was so cold it almost felt like his entire body was on fire. Then he was finished. He slammed his palm down on the completion button. He fell limp against the bone supports as pain cascaded through his skull. Yet the cage encasing him kept him upright. With a thought, the bones around his face unfurled, giving him a full view of the cavern.

Jason was now entombed in the former Hydra's rib cage, the ribs flattened and converted into multilayered panels of bones to protect Jason's body. Hinged bone plating was installed near his head, allowing him to quickly close the bone armor to protect his face. Four serpentine arms jutted from the bone torso, each one ending in a snakelike head. Its thickset legs were made of intertwining layers of bone.

Jason had transformed the Hydra's bones into a set of living armor. Even through the chaotic emotions and anger that clouded his mind, he knew that each limb was a separate skeleton and could be operated autonomously when given a string of commands.

His hands moved automatically through the motions of his *Corpse Explosion*. Red notifications flared in his peripheral vision as pain racked his head, but he ignored them, his mind focused solely on his revenge. He completed the casting as the zombies slammed into the ceiling, a series of explosions rocking the cavern. Blocks of crystal fell into the room and smashed into the stone floor. Jason could feel the vibrations as the rock in the ceiling shifted and settled. However, the ceiling held.

"Good. That gives me some time to make this asshole pay," Jason croaked. With a fleeting thought, he ordered another round of zombies onto the catapults. Then he turned his attention to the game master.

His snakelike arms reached into the air, and the heads released howls of rage. Abruptly, Jason leaped forward off the ridge. His bone legs promptly slammed into the stone floor of the cavern, cracks

radiating out from the impact site. Without warning, the four serpentine heads lashed out, crashing into the game master, who stood staring at Jason in shock. The simultaneous attacks knocked the man across the room, and he smashed into the stone wall, throwing up a thick cloud of debris.

Jason didn't wait for the mage to recover. He dashed forward, his arms lancing through the air and slamming into the man over and over in a rapid-fire series of strikes. Jason roared in rage as his new suit pounded the game master. He was going to kill him.

"You want a monster?" Jason screamed. "Then I'll give you a god damn monster!"

A wave of flame exploded from Florius' body, cascading outward and throwing Jason back. His armored suit landed heavily against the stone floor with a crunch of bone. Since Jason was suspended in the bone cage, he took no damage, and he immediately ordered the arms to lift him from the ground.

The game master stepped away from the wall, another layer of magma peeling away from his skin. Yet the look of rage was gone, replaced with one of wary concern. Without hesitating, Jason dashed forward again, whaling at the man that stood before him in fury. It was all the game master could do to ward off each blow as the snake arms attacked him from all directions. In the meantime, Riley and Frank had backed away, unable to participate in the titanic battle that was being waged before them.

Orbs of magma began appearing around Florius as he kept casting desperately. With a thought, Florius directed the orbs to intercept the skeletal heads, each blow from Jason destroying a globe. As the game master kept channeling his spell, more of the magma orbs appeared in the air, forming faster than Jason could destroy them. Finally, protected for a moment, Florius cast a different spell. A stream of fire slammed into one of the skeletal heads, causing the bones to crack and begin to fall apart.

Frank looked back at the catapults that sat ready to be fired. He turned to Riley. "Jason's lost it," he shouted over the explosions that rocked the room. "He's going to lose in a straight fight. We have to get his attention, or we can't win this."

Riley eyed Jason, her dark eyes filled with concern. "Leave it to me. When Jason pulls away from the game master, distract him for a moment."

Trusting her instincts, Frank nodded and began to circle around the cave. Riley knew that her next action was going to be crazy. Maybe Jason was having a bad effect on her. She darted toward the skeletal armor from behind. As she neared Jason, she vaulted onto the creature's back and used the ridged bones that encased Jason to swing

her way to the front. Jason's eyes widened as Riley's face popped into his line of sight. He quickly opened the ribcage to let her in and then resealed the body armor.

Inside, Riley found Jason floating in the center of the creature, only his head uncovered to provide sight of the room. With barely enough room for one person, Riley was pressed against him in the confined space. "You have to stop," Riley shouted over the noise of the fight. "If you keep going, we'll lose."

"But he killed Rex," Jason said in a tortured voice, black tears crawling down his cheeks. "He deserves this!"

"You can't beat him like this! Look at yourself! Your armor is already beginning to break down. If we lose here, Florius will likely destroy your army and the new NPCs in retribution. Rex would have wanted you to keep your people safe!"

She could see some sanity creep back into Jason's eyes. He shook his head to clear it. Then he rotated the body so that he had line of sight on the ridge on the other side of the room, his arms still independently attacking Florius. He could see the remainder of his zombies standing on the ledge, a few of his minions sitting on the catapults and ready to be launched. Yet he knew that another four zombies probably weren't going to be enough to create a cave-in.

He turned back to Riley, his voice slightly calmer. "I have a plan, but we're going to die."

"So what?" Riley said, her face close to his. "Like you said before – whatever it takes."

Jason closed his eyes for a moment, his thoughts racing. He was giving each of his minions and the bone suit a detailed list of orders, his pain-racked mind struggling to form the commands. Then he was done. He opened his eyes.

"Ready?" he asked Riley.

She grinned at him. "Always. May the darkness claim us."

"May the darkness claim us," Jason echoed numbly, his thoughts only focused on Rex. He would do what had to be done to protect his people.

The hulking bone armor abruptly dashed away from the game master, sprinting to the ledge. Its thick legs struck the stone floor in a series of thunderous crashes as it raced across the room. In the same moment, Frank lunged toward the game master from behind, his axes cutting through the air toward the man and forcing his attention away from Jason.

"You better focus on me," Frank roared. Florius turned with a confused expression that quickly shifted to disdain when he caught sight of the burly warrior.

Meanwhile, Jason neared the ledge, and approximately twenty

zombies jumped onto his armor, the snakelike arms wrapping around the undead and holding them against the bone frame. Then Jason turned back to the center of the room. In the brief time it had taken to load his zombies onto the bone armor, Frank had not fared well. He lay on the ground, broken, burned, and bleeding. Florius stood over him with a contemptuous expression.

"You think to challenge me, boy? I'm a god here!" His staff converted to a familiar fire lance that loomed over Frank's prone form.

"Gods don't bleed," Frank spat. He coughed hard, droplets of blood spraying the floor. "Besides, I was just a distraction." He grinned up at the man, his teeth stained crimson.

Florius whirled, but it was too late. Jason's last free arm wrapped his body and pulled him in close. Then the bone suit crouched, its ivory legs snapping and cracking. Like a spring, the legs unwound quickly, and the group shot toward the ceiling. Florius looked up in surprise, his face hovering a few feet from Jason's.

"What are you doing?" he screamed, his eyes wide as he saw the ceiling looming above them.

"Ending this," Jason replied darkly. His hands moved quickly, and a dark miasma of energy engulfed the bone armor and its passengers as it rocketed toward the multicolored ceiling. The energy grew until it blotted out the glow of the crystals, only Florius' angry face visible through the haze. The game master's hands desperately tried to form a series of gestures, but Jason stopped him by shifting and shaking him violently with the bone arm.

Jason's spell completed just as the group neared the ceiling. All of his zombies exploded simultaneously in a deafening explosion. The force of the blast carved a crater in the stone ceiling and instantly disintegrated Jason's bone armor. Jason's and Riley's bodies were shredded by the dark energy and shrapnel that cascaded around them, and only Florius remained. He was engulfed in a maelstrom of dark mana that peeled at his magma shields, ripping the material away from his skin faster than it could form.

Then Florius crashed onto the stone floor, knocking the wind from his lungs. He looked up to see several tons of rock descending upon him as the ceiling slowly collapsed with a deafening roar. His vision was blurred by the blood that ran down his face, and his broken hands frantically tried to complete a teleportation spell. He needed to get away from here.

Yet, at that moment, he felt a pair of hands grab his own, interrupting his spellcasting. Frank's bloodied face loomed in his vision. "Time to die, asshole," Frank hissed.

Then several thousand tons of rock and debris buried the pair,

the weight and momentum of the collapsing cavern proving too much even for Florius' protective spells.

System Message

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

Chapter 34 - Remorseful

Alex sat in a large leather chair in his study. For all he knew, his father might be home right now, but he hadn't made any effort to check. He was currently watching the Vermillion Live broadcast, reveling in the attention his victory in Grey Keep had garnered. Although, now that he thought about it, he should probably start calling the city by its proper name; the Crystal Reach.

He could feel the familiar, pleasant sensation seep through his mind as he watched the announcer recount the details of the rebellion that had occurred within the city yet again. Screenshots of his in-game character were plastered behind the woman. He still marveled at his resplendent armor. He cut an imposing, iconic figure for his new city.

"This is an incredible accomplishment for any player," the woman said with a brilliant smile. "So far, only two players have managed to conquer an in-game city, converting the structures and residents to one of the magic affinities."

The screen behind her shifted again, now showing a view of the Twilight Throne. Its dark, corrupted towers stretched into the endless black expanse that perpetually hung over the city. "As many of you know," the woman continued, waving at the screen behind her, "Jason is the first player to have taken control of a city. In fact, he accomplished this feat within the first real-world week of release!"

Alex clenched his fists involuntarily. After his conversation with the Lady and his choice to follow the Path of the Warrior, the numbing void had returned immediately. He had given himself over to the blissful emptiness in relief, and he was no longer plagued with the emotional turmoil that had held him back for the last few days. The broadcast made him want to lash out and destroy something. He couldn't understand why anyone would compare someone like him to that welfare case.

The announcer hesitated for a moment, her face taking on a confused expression as she touched a hand to her ear. "I-I'm sorry," she said, directing this comment at the camera. "There is some breaking news!"

The woman looked flabbergasted at the information that was being relayed to her, seemingly at a loss as to how to begin. Then she took a deep breath and launched into a hesitant explanation. "It appears that a player has managed to… well, he has slain one of the game masters!"

Alex's undivided attention was now on the screen. He could hear the whisper in the back of his mind grow louder, and a hollow knot twisted in his stomach. Who could have accomplished this feat? Everyone knew that the game masters were practically invincible. They had a reputation

for 'accidentally' demolishing towns.

"Since we at Vermilion Live have access to the latest and most up-to-date player videos, we are able to show you the final moments of this epic battle!"

The screen behind the woman shifted. The video clip began from the perspective of a player, lying on his side on the ground of a stone cavern. The player tag in the corner of the video showed that they were witnessing the perspective of someone named "Frank." The jagged rock walls were illuminated in a multicolored glow. Frank's breath came in heaving gasps and the camera tilted as he struggled to rise.

A deafening explosion rocked the cavern, and the camera spun as Frank turned. An enormous, expanding wave of dark energy rippled across the crystalline ceiling. Glowing crystals exploded violently in a shower of stone and debris. Then a lone body sailed out of the cloud, hurtling directly toward the ground.

As the body crashed into the stone floor, the camera perspective shifted to the game master. He stared straight at the ceiling, blinking rapidly to try to clear his eyes of the blood that ran freely down his face. His hand appeared in the frame as he rubbed at his eyes. As the view cleared, it revealed a terrifying scene. A mountain of stone and crystal was falling toward the man, and he drew in a sharp breath. Then Frank's bloodied face loomed in the camera, filling the screen. He stared down at the game master with hate-filled eyes.

"Time to die, asshole," Frank hissed. The rocks struck the two men that grappled on the floor, and the feed went dark.

The announcer reappeared on screen. She looked a bit shocked by the dramatic scene that had played out in the clip, having seen it for the first time along with her audience. She cleared her throat delicately before continuing, "All players logged into the game during the death of the game master received the following prompt."

Immediately, a floating blue screen appeared in front of the camera.

Universal System Message

The Twilight Throne's first guild, <Original Sin>, has defeated Florius, the master of flame. The master of flame has been permanently slain. Only five masters remain.

For this feat, every NPC and player in the Twilight Throne will be granted a 20% bonus to experience and skill growth for an in-game week.

Tremble, mortals, for no one is safe from the darkness. - the Dark One

“Frankly, this is incredible,” the woman exclaimed. “Until today, we didn’t know that the game masters were mortal. Many had considered them invincible system administrators.” She hesitated for a moment as though uncertain how to continue. “It’s surprising that they were not granted immunity by the developers… but I expect that this was intended to preserve the realistic nature of the game.”

The woman glanced behind her at a still image of the three members of <Original Sin>. The trio was framed in a swirling, blood-red mist, their dark forms towering over a player kneeling on the ground. Jason stood at the center, plates of bones rotating around him. Frank and Riley stood to either side of him, blood stains marring their armor. All three stared at the camera with an unnerving calm. The words “Original Sin” slowly appeared over the still image, seemingly written in blood by an invisible hand.

“They’re truly incredible,” the announcer said softly, her eyes on the image behind her.

Alex’s fist slammed into the armrest of his chair. “Again?” he snarled incredulously. “Jason surpassed me again?” He flipped through the gaming channels and realized that the story of the game master’s death was airing on every station. Alex’s achievement in the Crystal Reach was being quickly overshadowed by Jason’s latest accomplishment.

The insidious whisper in the back of his mind grew louder until he was almost overwhelmed by the voice. He closed his eyes, pressing the palms of his hands against his ears in an attempt to drown out the noise. Then he felt a hand rest on his shoulder. He started, opening his eyes and turning slightly. Pale, slender fingers rested on his shoulder. The nails were immaculately manicured, and Alex caught a whiff of a strangely familiar perfume.

A feminine voice spoke from behind him, “Don’t worry, my dear boy. We’ll simply do what Lanes do best: eliminate the competition.”

* * *

Jason sat at the kitchen counter in his aunt’s bungalow, stirring a bowl of cereal idly as his mind wandered. He wasn’t certain what had happened after his fight with the game master the previous evening. He expected he had passed out. The stress of the previous few hours in-game, coupled with casting his *Custom Skeleton* spell

must have put him over the edge.

A faint worry tickled at the back of his mind. He wasn't certain what had happened to his army or the newly formed NPCs. He also didn't know what had become of the game master. He didn't have the fortitude to face logging back in or checking the news channels. He simply sat in silence, brooding over his bowl.

Angie chose that moment to walk into the kitchen. She stopped abruptly as she saw the almost palpable cloud hanging over Jason's head. "So," she began tentatively as she edged toward the fridge. "I'm actually a bit nervous to ask you what's wrong this time."

Jason merely grunted in response. He didn't know what to say. His friend had died because of him. Yet how was he going to explain that the friend in question hadn't been real? Even as he thought about it, he cringed at how stupid it all sounded and then immediately felt guilty for diminishing Rex's death. He had been in this spiral for a while.

Angie grabbed a bowl from a cabinet, poured herself some cereal, and sat down across from Jason at the small kitchen island. She didn't say anything for a long time, simply taking slow bites of her breakfast and waiting patiently.

Finally, Jason couldn't take it anymore. "I killed him, alright! He wasn't real and I shouldn't care, but I still killed him." He could feel tears budding in his eyes. Was a game supposed to make him feel like this?

Angie looked at him calmly. "I'm going to need a bit more to go on than that. Should I be calling the cops or a shrink?" she asked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Jason couldn't help but chuckle slightly, resting his face in his hands to hide the tears in his eyes. "Probably the shrink," he muttered, his voice muffled by his hands.

"So, what happened?" Angie asked with a smile.

"One of the in-game characters and leaders of my city died last night," he began, his voice cracking slightly. "He was one of the first characters I befriended in-game. Now I'm responsible for his death since I came up with the plan that got him killed." He hesitated and then dropped his hands, staring at the bowl in front of him. "I feel so stupid. It's just a game, but at the same time, it feels so real. I *knew* him, and he's not coming back."

He finally found the nerve to glance up at Angie, expecting an incredulous laugh. Instead, he found only sympathy in her eyes. She put a hand on his where it rested on the table. "He was real to you – that's what matters," she said.

"I also expect that if he was one of your city's leaders, then he made up his own mind whether to follow you. He likely knew the

risks. It's easy to blame yourself – even typical in this situation. However, your friend made his own choice," she said firmly.

"You don't understand," Jason said. "I led the players there, trapping them in a dungeon to create new NPCs for my city. I knew there was a risk that a game master would show up and what they were capable of."

Angie paused before responding. "I have to admit something, and you have to promise not to laugh at an old woman," she said with a chuckle. "I've been watching the videos posted on the Vermillion Live channel, most of which involve you. I was a bit curious after all."

Jason winced. He could only imagine what his aunt would say. He knew exactly what his parents' position would be if they found out he was some kind of psychopath in-game.

"We all play a role," Angie said quietly. "In your case, you're a leader. Behind the evil playacting, you rule a city in that game. Leaders must make hard choices. I sure as hell hate my bosses for some of the decisions they make when they cut corners on products, but I know that sometimes they're also thinking about the good of the company and its employees."

She sighed before continuing. "I guess what I'm saying is that there are times when you're going to have to make hard decisions for the greater good. As a result, some of the people you care about in-game might get hurt, but anyone who has met the person I saw on that channel would know that following you carries risks. You're basically painting a giant target on your back!"

"I was backed into a corner on the last video you probably saw," Jason said sullenly. "Someone pinned the desecration of a temple on me. I figured I'd double down."

Angie chuckled. "You sure as hell did! Pardon my French, but you declared war on a city! I'm not trying to make you feel bad by saying this. I just want to point out that the people following you would have to be stupid not to understand the risk involved. The fact that they still support you says a great deal about the man beneath the mask."

He looked up at her and saw her smiling proudly at him. She continued, "The fact that you care enough to mourn for your friend also says a lot about you."

He was touched by Angie's words. She had done a lot for him since he had moved in with her. She was also much wiser than he originally gave her credit for. Maybe she was right. He had replayed the events in the Hydra's den enough times in his head to know that Rex had made his choice willingly. He knew what was at stake and had sacrificed himself for the greater good. He had believed in their cause.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Jason finally said, some strength reentering his voice. “You may also be on to something when you mentioned mourning. Perhaps I can still honor Rex in-game.”

“That sounds like a good start,” Angie said with a smile. “Now cheer up already. There’s a whole day ahead of you. I believe that I heard something about an undead army that’s still sitting outside of a dungeon when I checked the channel earlier. I think you still have some work to do.”

Jason matched Angie’s smile, although perhaps without as much enthusiasm. Talking to her had helped, and she was right that he needed to get back to work. Rex wouldn’t have sat around and cried over spilled milk.

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Although I’m starting to think I should have started talking to you about this stuff sooner. You wouldn’t be interested in being part of a Shadow Council, would you?” he added with a chuckle.

Angie laughed in response and shook her head. “I’m not sure I could handle the responsibility. However, I never mind talking with you about your problems. One thing I have in abundance is experience. Perhaps that’s the only thing,” she said with a laugh of her own.

Jason smiled and rose. He dropped his bowl in the sink before making his way back around the kitchen island. As he passed Angie, he stooped down and hugged her shoulders. “Thanks, Angie,” he said. “For everything.”

Jason walked off to take a shower. He needed to go through his normal morning routine and take care of a few real-world errands before he logged back in. Angie watched him walk out of the room, a small smile on her face.

A couple hours later, Jason was sitting on his bed. He had prepped his video footage to send to Robert and Claire. He had also submitted a few of his homework assignments that he had stockpiled. Now he sat staring at the plastic helmet in his hands, his fingers tracing the dense material. He was hesitating all over again.

He closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep calming breath. “Don’t be a coward,” Jason said aloud. Then he pulled the helmet over his head and lay down on the bed.

In the next moment, he found himself standing at the entrance to the dungeon. He could see the dusty stone walls beside him, thick vines hanging from the stone. He noticed that the icons for Frank and Riley on his group menu were still grayed out.

“Jason!” a voice shouted from behind him.

He turned to find William approaching. The burly zombie was nearly a foot taller than most of the undead troops that stood behind

him. As William neared, he gripped Jason's arm in greeting. "Hello, William," Jason said. Questions flitted through his mind. Yet he was too nervous to ask them.

As though he were reading Jason's mind, William offered the answers to his unasked questions. "Almost everyone made it out. I think a few of the latest batch of kin you summoned were caught up in that final fight, but otherwise we suffered few losses." He gestured at the dungeon behind him. "The travelers stopped respawning some time ago. Perhaps there's a limit to your immortality after all," William said with a grin.

Jason chuckled. He suspected that the real answer was that the game masters or Cerillion Entertainment had finally intervened and reset their spawn points. As popular as Jason might be, letting him continuously massacre a group of players was a significant PR problem. Then his expression turned sour. Judging from William's demeanor, he didn't yet know what had happened in the dungeon. There was no sense sugar coating it.

"William… Rex is dead. He died fighting against the master of flame in the dungeon," Jason said somberly. A few of the undead soldiers around them jerked in surprise, startled by this revelation.

Jason turned to address the soldiers that stood in the small valley. "Rex is dead," he shouted across the field. "He died to save the lives of our kin. He died a hero."

A stony silence met this announcement. Then a lone voice called out from the legion, shouting out the fallen general's name. The others soon joined him. Within moments, Rex's name thundered across the small valley as nearly a thousand undead, both veteran warriors and the newly born, chanted his name.

Jason marveled at the reaction. From the soldiers, it wasn't terribly surprising. They had known the man and fought beside him. Yet the freshly summoned men and women had met him only a few hours before his death. Perhaps that had been enough. Jason certainly wouldn't forget his introduction to the rugged weapon master.

As the chanting died down, William turned to Jason. "What now?" he asked.

Jason looked at the burly man, his mind already considering his next steps. "First Peccavi and then home. We have much work to do, William – and you have large shoes to fill."

Chapter 35 - Celebratory

"That should have counted as a victory!" Robert exclaimed, his argument directed at Claire, who sat beside him on the podium in the control room.

She sighed, raising her hand and rubbing at the bridge of her nose. "At best, it was a draw, which means we both lost," she repeated for at least the twelfth time in the last hour. She gestured to the techs, who had retaken their seats. "You know full well that Johnson won the pool since he's the only one that bet on a tie."

Claire didn't mind losing, but she wasn't exactly ecstatic about the death of the game master. She expected that the fallout with the CPSC over these events would easily overshadow the media frenzy and free advertising the short video clips would generate. The relationship between the CPSC and Cerillion Entertainment had been strained for a while. It had started when the board had essentially thrown the CPSC to the wolves when faced with the questions about why it wasn't possible to fix the in-game damage caused by the game masters. She could only imagine what would happen now that a player had permanently slain one of their game masters.

"This is going to end poorly," Claire said in a dark tone.

Her eyes were on the screen above the lab. Robert had divided the monitor into eight panes, watching the media traffic on several different channels at once. A few anchors had already denounced Jason's acts as some type of video game terrorism. Claire felt that label might be a bit overused if it was now being applied to a game.

Claire lowered her voice so that the techs couldn't hear her. "How are we going to explain why the game masters are somehow mortal? Who creates administrators that can be slain by players?"

Robert didn't respond immediately, watching the screens with a sullen expression. "I suppose we could always claim that we hard-coded the game to force all avatars to be mortal. I like that one announcer's argument that we did it to enhance the game's realism."

He sighed. "Not that anyone with half a brain cell would buy that line. Maybe we'll get lucky, and we'll only be dealing with political hacks when the questions start raining in. So far, I haven't been impressed with the CPSC's staff."

Robert might be right. The director of the CPSC was an old-school authoritarian bible thumper, which meant they were going to get hit with a lot of flak for this. However, she also lacked the technical expertise to challenge the claims they were making regarding the game's structure, and Cerillion Entertainment had made no promises to release the game's code

as part of its collaborative effort with the CPSC.

Robert looked at Claire, a grin creeping across his face. "You have to admit, though, Jason deserved that victory. You might not like him, but he's talented."

"Fine," she admitted grudgingly. "Jason might have won that battle fairly – if you could really call it a win." Claire's eyes darted to the dark obelisks in the adjacent room. "However, you cannot ignore the fact that Alfred's influence over the game world is growing. At some point, if nothing changes, we will be doing little more than monitoring his activity."

"We've been over this before, Claire," Robert replied, his smile fading. "Do you have any proof that he's hurting anyone? From where I'm sitting, all he's done is make some changes to a video game. Anything he's done to influence the players in the real world has actually improved them, either physically or emotionally. The response from the players has been unanimously positive."

She gritted her teeth at his response. She was getting tired of that argument. Not because he was wrong, but because it was what was keeping her from blowing the whistle. The scientist in her couldn't reconcile that argument against the risk she knew Alfred posed. If only she had proof that AO was unsafe for the players. Yet with Alfred covering his tracks, she would likely have to wait until he messed up. At least this latest development was certain to draw more attention from the CPSC. It was only a matter of time until they discovered how much control Alfred really had.

"Maybe the problem will solve itself," Claire thought hopefully.

* * *

The journey back to Peccavi was uneventful. Jason had messaged Frank and Riley before the group left the dungeon. Hopefully, they would receive the message when they logged back in. After significant prodding, he had also sent Pint back to the Twilight Throne to inform Jerry and Morgan that he would be returning in a few days. He omitted the part about Rex's death. He felt he should tell them in person.

Jason used the long march back to town to designate the two divisions that would be staying in Peccavi. He would need the third to accompany him and the new NPCs back to the Twilight Throne. After the conflict with the game master, he was down to only a handful of his own minions which meant he needed to lean on the NPCs.

He had gathered William, the division leaders, and the smaller group sergeants together on the ride back and explained that he

planned to routinely clear the dungeon each week to provide new bodies. He gave them detailed information regarding the enemies that occupied the dungeon and how to defeat them. Jason had come up with a few strategies for how the undead might tackle the dungeon once it respawned. He expected that after they cleared it a few times, the process would become much easier, the soldiers leveling up and gearing themselves in the process.

After a few hours, the small town of Peccavi came into view. The black-hued village still appeared small from this distance, but Jason's eyes widened as he saw the rows of tan tents lining the hills beside the smooth obsidian walls of the town. He called for the line to halt immediately.

"Is the town under siege?" Jason asked, turning to William who stood beside him.

The man gave a rumbling laugh. "Not exactly. I had a scout return to town while you were occupied in the dungeon. I anticipated that you would need to spend the night in town before heading back to the city."

The large man gestured at the long line of undead that wound up the mountain trail behind them. "It quickly became obvious that we would have nowhere to put these people."

Jason felt like face palming. He hadn't considered how to provision or board this many undead. While they didn't need to eat or sleep, he couldn't reasonably expect them to have no privacy or place to themselves. He had only been focused on raising the new members of his civilization.

"Good thinking," he said to William. "I should have considered this myself."

William looked at him askance. "A leader cannot be in all places at all times or consider every contingency. He's only as strong as the people that follow him." The large man's face clouded. "I've witnessed that many times over the last few weeks. If not for the strength and resilience of the people of Peccavi, we would have died of starvation or the were-beasts that plagued our lands."

Jason nodded appreciatively. William's words mirrored what the Old Man had said to him several times. He had just been too stubborn and focused on his goal to listen. He looked from the town back to William.

"Speaking of the were-beasts, I have much to tell you regarding what we found in the dungeon," Jason said. "Perhaps we should call a meeting of the town elders when we arrive. Then I only need to explain it once."

"I look forward to hearing what you have to say," William replied. "I have noticed a few of the missing villagers among the kin

you raised, but have not had an opportunity to speak with them."

An hour later, the column arrived at the town. William took command of the undead with brisk efficiency, ordering division leaders to take over the responsibility of ensuring that the newborn undead were settled. He also sent a man to gather the village elders at his home. The soldiers snapped to attention and then hurried to carry out his orders.

As Jason listened to the stream of instructions, he felt more optimistic for the future. William was a capable man and would be able to lead this town in his absence. The burly man noticed his glance. "They will be fine," William said, interpreting Jason's inspection for worry.

"I have no doubt," he replied evenly.

William cleared his throat. "But I do have one suggestion. I think we should celebrate your victory. The men could sorely use a celebration, and it would go a long way to helping the newcomers integrate."

Jason looked at the burly man in surprise before glancing back at the undead that thronged around them. He inspected the new kin with fresh eyes as they were led among the tents by the soldiers. They seemed confused and distracted, uncertain about their future. Since Rex's death, he felt no desire to celebrate, but he could acknowledge the truth in William's words. He had underestimated the man again.

"You're just full of bright ideas today!" Jason said with a chuckle. "A party it is then. Since you all don't eat, I assume you have enough booze to get these people at least a little bit drunk."

William grinned. "That's about the only thing we have left! The soldiers that came with Rex were also lugging along a surprising number of kegs. I guess alcohol is the new rations for the undead."

Jason smiled. That sounded about right. With a quick order from William, an undead soldier was sent off at a run, an excited grin on his face.

As the two men then entered the town, Jason noticed that William and the townsfolk had been hard at work while they were waiting for Rex's forces to arrive. The road leading into the town had already been widened and flattened. The walls surrounding the town were also being fortified. Wooden scaffolding had been erected, indicating that the fortifications were being raised higher and towers would eventually dot the walls.

The homes had also seen some improvements, with many of the dwellings in the process of being enlarged and expanded. William had clearly anticipated that they would need to house many more undead than the town was currently capable of holding. The undead remaining in Peccavi would at least have decent dwellings.

The townspeople had also been transformed in Jason's absence. They walked about the town with their heads held high, and their eyes full of determination and hope. As Jason and William passed, more than one person bowed their head respectfully in greeting. Groups of undead children also ran through the street, their happy shrieks filling the air and mixing with the din of a busy town. A small skeleton girl peeled off from the group and raced toward William.

"Papa!" the girl cried. William broke into a huge grin and grabbed her up as she approached.

"How are you, baby girl?" he asked tenderly, as he hugged his daughter.

Krista's bony jaw clacked in imitation of a smile. "I'm good! I missed you!"

William glanced at Jason with an embarrassed expression, before replying. "I missed you too. We're heading home if you want to go back and play with your friends. Is Mama at home?"

Krista nodded excitedly before pecking William on his pale cheek. Then she darted toward Jason, giving him a quick hug. In a flash, the girl was gone, racing back down the street to catch up with her friends. Jason was shocked by the hug, and his eyes followed her form as she ran away into the town. Then an idle thought struck him. Would Krista always remain a young girl? Would she grow up? Could undead grow up?

He had no idea how to answer these questions and blanched slightly as he considered what would happen if Krista mentally matured inside the body of a young girl, albeit a skeletal one. He would have to pose these questions to Morgan when he returned. Hopefully, her research had turned up some information on the undead race.

William was oblivious to Jason's thoughts, his hood completely masking his facial expressions. The pair continued their march to the far side of the town, walking up the hill towards William's home. As they entered, Patricia looked up at the pair, and her face broke into a large smile. Similar to her daughter, she raced to hug her husband.

"I'm glad you're safe," Patricia whispered into his shoulder, after a momentary embrace.

She pulled away and looked at Jason. "It is good to see you again, Jason. I hear your raid on the dungeon was successful, and we have many new members of our race." As she said this last part, the woman looked down at her pale-white hands skeptically.

"We accomplished our goal," Jason said, shying away from mentioning what they had lost in the process – what he had lost. "You're not fond of your new body?" he asked, noticing Patricia's troubled expression.

“Well, there are some things I miss,” Patricia said, her eyes still on her hands. “In particular, the taste of food and the dreams that come with actually sleeping through the night.”

“And perhaps a few other things,” William insinuated with a grin, hugging his wife with one arm.

She slapped his chest with her hand. “Behave,” she admonished, but a smile curled her lips. Then she glanced at Jason with an embarrassed expression. “But he does have a point. There are some things we simply cannot do.”

Jason nodded. “It’s certainly a tradeoff. Many of the newborn undead won’t remember their previous lives. Perhaps that’s for the best. Yet at least you’re alive, and you have your family.”

Patricia raised her hands to forestall any further argument. “I don’t disagree. Please don’t misunderstand; I’m thankful for what you’ve done. It’s just an adjustment – one I haven’t quite made yet,” she said with a weak smile.

William clapped his hands. “Well let’s have a change of subject then, shall we. We need to learn what our friend Jason has been up to. The village elders should be here soon. I sent a runner. Let’s take a seat while we wait.”

A few minutes later, a motley group of undead entered the house, each greeting Jason respectfully and taking their seats around the table. Once the group was assembled, Jason launched into his tale. He explained how the cultists had been trying to create a god using their shapeshifting magic and had kidnapped the villagers of neighboring towns to acquire test subjects.

He also explained how his group had slaughtered the cultists and had raised the lost villagers who had survived the Masters’ experiments. William and the elders listened with rapt attention, and he could hear the sharp intake of breath as he explained the condition of the villagers.

“You have certainly solved the mystery, even going one step further and rescuing our people,” William finally said. “We’re indebted to you. Again.” The men and women around the table nodded in agreement.

A prompt appeared in Jason’s vision.

Quest Completed: Our Time of Ruin

After investigating the mountains north of Peccavi, you discovered a cult of insane cultists hellbent on creating a homemade god. You promptly ended their lives and rescued the missing villagers.

Reward: The unswerving loyalty of the people of Peccavi and William.

One of the elders glanced at the group around him. Seeing some sign of agreement in their eyes, he nodded with a determined look. “We don’t have much, but we would like you to have this as a reward,” the elder said, pushing a bag toward Jason.

He lifted the pouch, surprised at its weight. Jason drew back the string and found a small stack of gold coins. He looked up at the people around the table. This had been a poor town before it had been converted to the dark, and he expected that this bag represented nearly all the wealth the town had to offer. He frowned.

“I thank you for this gift,” Jason said. “However, I cannot accept it. You’re my people now. You’re kin. The promises I made to you before I left were not empty. I would have helped you for nothing.”

Jason pushed the bag back across the table. “Take this money and improve the town. Use it to clothe and protect your people. Grow this place into something awe-inspiring.”

The men and women around the table looked at him in stunned silence. They hadn’t expected him to turn down what they viewed as a small fortune. Another elder sputtered, “We must do something to repay you for what you’ve done.” The others nodded in agreement.

“If that’s how you feel, then I have a task for you.” Jason looked at them evenly. He had not yet explained his true goal to these men and women. “I need to conquer the dungeon each week and claim the bodies of the fallen.”

He paused, looking at each man and woman in turn. “If you’re willing, I would request that the soldiers and townsfolk here brave the dungeon each time it repopulates. I need them to kill the inhabitants and bring their bodies to me in the Twilight Throne.”

“I don’t understand,” one of the elders said. “What is the purpose of this?”

Jason could see fear in their eyes. Only a few days ago, the were-beasts had hunted them in the darkness that hovered outside their walls. Now he was asking them to attack those beasts and their masters.

“I can raise others the same way I raised this town’s people,” Jason explained. “The enemies of our people return to life with no memories of their previous existence. This is how we will grow our population. Without it, we cannot breed, and any losses permanently weaken us.

“I understand that this isn’t an easy thing that I’m asking you to do. You will be facing the same cultists that slayed your townsfolk. However, it is necessary to ensure our survival. The people of Peccavi will be our frontline, protecting us from extinction.”

The eyes of the undead around the table filled with understanding at his words, many nodding their heads. William watched them carefully, seeing a consensus among the town elders. Already knowing full well what Jason planned to do with the town and having been privy to Jason’s plans for how to defeat the dungeon, he threw his support behind him.

“We owe you nothing less. It’s a small price to pay for the life and safety of our town.” The other elders soon added their voices to his, voting unanimously to accept the task that Jason had given them.

He smiled. “I certainly won’t leave you empty-handed. Two divisions of our soldiers will remain in the town. They will act as the main force to assault the dungeon. I also anticipate that many of the newly born kin will choose to stay here after the celebration this evening. The soldiers I leave here can train the others, and your people will level quickly inside the dungeon.”

Then he raised a hand in caution. “I must warn you, however. We are a new race, and our enemies are many. You will need to grow strong, using the dungeon as a training ground. You will also need to fortify this town and the valley outside the dungeon.”

“It will be done,” one of the elders responded, determination in her voice. The others sat straighter in their chairs. Jason could see the fear in their eyes quickly replaced with resolve. William glanced at Jason, a proud glint in his eyes. He had spoken of the strength of the townsfolk. He hadn’t been wrong.

Breaking the heavy mood that hung over the table, William interjected. “If that’s all, I think we have a celebration to plan!” The elders smiled, and the group started to exit the house. Jason expected that they were planning to start the party early.

William rested a heavy hand on Jason’s shoulder as he was about to leave the house. “We will eventually grow strong, but it may take us some time before the first bodies arrive. Have faith in these people.”

Jason looked back at him evenly. “Trust me, I do. More than that, I have faith in *you*. In my absence, I am appointing you as the general of the northern legion.”

William looked at him in shock before breaking into a grin. “You call a couple hundred soldiers a legion?”

Jason glanced out the doorway. He could see the townsfolk gathering together at the bottom of the hill, and a line of kegs had magically appeared in the clearing. He could see the smiles light up

the faces of more than one undead, and a toast was already being raised. Beyond the walls of the town, hundreds of undead shifted through the neat rows of tents as they settled into their temporary home.

"Perhaps not yet, but they will be," Jason replied, pride in his voice. Rex had left a strong legacy with his sacrifice.

Chapter 36 - Revelatory

George sat at his desk at Cerillion Entertainment headquarters. His eyes scanned a report prepared by his assistant which summarized Jason's activity in-game over the last few days and the resulting media exposure. He was startled at the strategy the boy had concocted to increase the population of his city. He had neatly manipulated the in-game rules and placed the CPSC in a tenuous position.

"Perhaps I've underestimated this boy," he murmured. Jason's influence in-game was growing, and with it, his importance to the company. He was now a media icon, with fans and enemies on both sides of the fence.

The report also indicated that others had added to the real-world money bounty on Jason's head. George chuckled softly as he saw that the reward had risen to nearly $30,000. The players were essentially crowdfunding the bounty, allowing people harmed by Jason to add money to the pool. Video evidence of his death was required to collect, including at least one witness and a screenshot of a combat log showing that he had died. The players had also requested that Cerillion Entertainment confirm the death to avoid forgeries. George was more than happy to oblige.

With a flick of his wrist, George shifted the semi-transparent screen to the next report. This one covered his son's progress. He had been demonstrating an odd shift in personality over the last few days. First, he had beaten two teens nearly to death at a party – a fact that still caused George to grit his teeth. Luckily, there had been little evidence that Alex was involved, and the pair were too drunk to recall his son's face.

In stark contrast, Alex had gone on to heal the poor and sickly of Grey Keep, quickly installing himself as a new religious leader within the city. Then there was the revolt and overthrow of the city's leadership culminating in the transformation of the city. The rebellion was a move that reminded George more of his son's typical personality, but the city's conversion also meant that Alex had garnered the attention of an in-game deity.

He tapped his fingers against the desk. His secretary had explained that Alex had shown up at his office to speak with him a couple days ago, but she had turned him away since George had been in a meeting. This was unusual for Alex, who typically avoided his father. He expected that he still blamed him for his mother's death even after all this time.

"Perhaps Alfred is healing him," George pondered aloud. There was at least some evidence to support that conclusion. If that was the case, then it was imperative that George protect Alfred's existence from the CPSC.

His thoughts were interrupted by a chime emitted by his Core. He tapped the device on his wrist, and his secretary's voice floated into the room. "I have Ms. Bastion here to see you, sir."

George sighed. "Perfect," he muttered.

Gloria Bastion was the current director of the CPSC. He had personally resisted her appointment to that position but had ultimately been defeated. Since her appointment was politically charged, he lacked the sway to prevent it. Unfortunately, Gloria knew his stance on the matter, which he was certain would make this conversation much more hostile.

"Sir? Should I let her in?" his secretary inquired.

"Yes, go ahead," George replied. He shifted in his seat, smoothing his suit jacket and checking his appearance in a mirror that discreetly hung to the side of his desk. Then he swiped away the console in front of him, leaving only an ornate wooden desk.

A moment later, Gloria stepped into the voluminous office. She was dressed in an immaculate dark-blue suit. She strode into the room without hesitation, her piercing grey eyes taking in both the office and George with a faint whiff of disdain.

George rose and circled his desk. "Hello, Gloria," he greeted the woman cordially. There was no sense antagonizing her before he felt out her position and the reason for her visit. Although, he could certainly guess at her goal.

"George," she said curtly, ignoring his offered hand and taking a seat in front of his desk.

A frown of irritation warped George's mouth before he could control his expression. At least she hadn't seen it since he was standing behind her. He returned to his seat and watched the woman for a moment. He would wait until she spoke first. Gloria looked around the office briefly before her eyes lit back upon George.

With a small frown, she spoke up. "I expect you know why I'm here."

"Your message was rather vague," George replied evenly. "Perhaps you could enlighten me?"

Gloria's frown deepened. "The death of a game master has raised concerns within my organization regarding our ability to police the conduct of the players within your game." She said the word "game" with a faint note of disgust.

She continued, "I'm certain you recall that this joint effort was initiated to forestall re-opening an investigation of your company's product and to address public health and safety concerns." She leaned forward slightly, her eyes glinting in the glow cast by the recessed cam lights in the ceiling. "It would be unfortunate if we were forced to succumb to those demands now."

George lifted his hands, palms facing the ceiling in a gesture of

futility. "I'm not certain what to tell you. I made no promises that the game masters would be invincible within the game world, and I have permitted full access to your people. Perhaps your staff's conduct is what triggered this most recent series of events. As I understand it, Jason was not directly responsible for attacking the players."

A small smile lifted the corners of George's mouth. "There has also been significant damage to several towns and cities in the game world due to your employees'… enthusiasm. Understand that this isn't a simple game. We cannot alter many of the essential mechanics, including the destruction of buildings and terrain or the mortality of the world's inhabitants."

Gloria's eyes flashed. "You're telling me that you cannot simply patch those issues? You designed this game, didn't you?"

George's smile widened, and he pressed a hand to his chest. "Not me personally," he replied with a chuckle. "I have to take my staff at their word. They're quite talented. I should also point out that this is a business. Even if we were able to do what you've suggested, which would be incredibly time-consuming and expensive, this would ruin the experience for our customers. They demand realism.

"Besides," George began, his hand swiping over the desktop and an image abruptly appearing along the wooden surface. The view showed another network's news broadcast. "My understanding is that the CPSC is being painted as the villain here. It seems video footage of your employee's behavior in that dungeon is going viral."

Gloria blanched slightly as she witnessed Florius' rant about how Jason and other players should be imprisoned in the real world for their in-game behavior. George's smile widened. He had released this footage anonymously minutes after Gloria left her office. He expected it might come as a bit of a shock.

Her glaring eyes turned on him, and her stony-faced expression cracked. "You released this, didn't you? You bastard!" She rose quickly from her seat, storming towards the door. As she reached for the handle, she turned back to George. "This isn't the end. I'll be watching you closely."

"I look forward to it," George replied calmly. Then the door slammed shut.

* * *

Jason, Frank, and Riley walked at the front of the column of undead. The Twilight Throne's spires loomed in front of them, lightning arcing between the black clouds that hovered over the city. Jason felt a sense of relief wash over him as he saw the familiar dark

walls. He had come to think of this place as his in-game home. It was good to be back.

Frank echoed his thoughts. “I never thought I’d say this, but it’s good to see this place again.”

“I agree,” Riley added. “This was an interesting journey, but I could use a break.” She glanced at Jason. “I don’t understand how you stay in-game constantly.”

Jason chuckled. “Practice and desperation. Don’t forget that this is basically my day job now!”

His glance shifted to the line of undead behind him. Nearly two hundred of the newly formed kin had elected to stay in Peccavi when they left. That meant they had added nearly four hundred new residents to the small town when Jason included the two divisions that were now garrisoned there. He had also added another six hundred kin to the Twilight Throne’s population – which wasn’t bad for a real-world week!

Once William and the townsfolk could reliably defeat the dungeon, Jason expected that another couple hundred corpses should begin arriving regularly. He would need to remember to keep sending reinforcements back with the wagon crews to cover the town’s losses.

The gates to the city swung wide as the undead approached. Jason had sent runners ahead to alert the city that they were arriving and to summon Jerry and Morgan to the keep for a meeting. He might as well update them immediately. There was no sense waiting or letting them hear what had happened second-hand.

As the column entered through the gates, a wave of sound struck them. Jason’s eyes widened as he took in the undead that lined the street leading to the north gate. Their arms waved in the air as they shouted at the new undead in approval. The men and women that marched behind him looked at the group in amazement, any lingering doubt regarding their new existence beginning to fade.

“Holy shit,” Frank said from beside Jason, eyeing the undead with a dumbfounded expression.

“There’s nothing holy about it,” Jason said with a chuckle. This earned him a punch from Riley.

“Terrible joke,” she muttered. “We’re going to have enough of Jerry’s awful sense of humor when we meet him.”

The city’s undead had come out in mass, lining the road all the way to the market. Jason even spotted players standing along the streets, albeit some looked more confused than celebratory. He hoped they at least had the sense to keep their weapons sheathed. Drawing a blade against Jason or his new citizens would be an instant death sentence.

As the group neared the marketplace, they were confronted by

a veritable sea of undead. Jason and his group moved to the front of the keep, and a line of soldiers immediately separated them from the crowd, creating a loose wall. Jason spared a glance at the new undead who began to filter among the residents. He knew that his division leader and his troops would handle getting the new residents sorted. Hopefully, Morgan and Jerry had coordinated to have houses made available for their new tenants. Many of the homes in the city were still vacant.

"I think they're expecting a speech," Riley said with a chuckle, watching the exuberant crowd. "It also looks like at least one has started celebrating already." She gestured to a man leaning heavily against a wooden stall, his mug raised in the air as though toasting Jason.

"Well, let's give them what they want," Jason replied.

He turned to address the crowd, silence slowly descending over the group. "Hello, residents of the Twilight Throne," he shouted. "Hello, kin!"

A wave of cheers met his introduction and a smile curled his lips. "We return victorious in our mission. We have added nearly a thousand new citizens to our ranks. We have also given our enemies more reason to fear us!"

Another roaring cry went up through the ocean of undead. Jason's tone became a bit darker. "While there is much to celebrate, this isn't a time to become overconfident. The entire world may soon be pitted against us, and we must grow strong. We want the world to think twice before they throw themselves against the might of the Twilight Throne!"

A player roughly pushed through the throng of undead until he was standing at the line of guards. He glared at Jason before shouting, "You're nothing but a murderer and a sadist. You're a digital terrorist that tortures innocent men and women. You deserve to die." At this last statement, the man began casting at the stage. Lumps of rock were ripped from the ground and began to spiral around his staff.

Before Jason could react, an arrow embedded itself in the man's throat. Jason glanced to his side. Riley stood poised with her bow before her, the string still vibrating and her eyes a dark obsidian. Frank had also positioned himself in front of Jason, his axes raised. A hushed silence descended on the crowd as they witnessed the instant reaction of Jason's teammates and their eyes lingered on the man now bleeding out on the ground.

Wow, we're still on edge, Jason thought ruefully. He had to admit that the last few days in-game had been stressful, but they had grown stronger for it.

Jason patted Riley's shoulder gently, and she softened her grip

on the bow and assumed a more relaxed stance. At a gesture from Jason, Frank also lowered his axes and stepped back. Jason turned back to the crowd, gesturing at the man in front of him. “You see this? Our enemies are everywhere. They hide among us and seek the destruction of our city and its people.”

He paused and let the tension build. “Let me be clear; this is what will happen to any man or woman that attacks the kin – instant and merciless death.”

Jason walked slowly to the gasping player, the line of soldiers parting slightly. Jason grabbed the man’s hair and yanked his head up to face him. Then he stabbed his blade into the man’s eye, instantly ending his life. The corpse dropped to the cobblestones with a wet thud.

He took a few steps back, his hands beginning an intricate series of gestures and dark energy weaving around his fingers. Thunder soon boomed in the clouds overhead. A bolt of black lightning struck the prone corpse with a crash. His skin swiftly melted away, leaving only bleached-white bone. After a long moment, the corpse opened its soulless black eyes and pushed itself from the ground.

“You see this!” Jason cried into the hushed silence that had descended upon the crowd. He walked forward and placed his hand on the skeleton’s shoulder. “Our enemies will only make us stronger. For every one that we claim, our race will grow until our darkness spreads to the farthest reaches of this world. They will regret ever challenging the Twilight Throne.”

A roaring cry went up through the crowd like a cresting wave. Their voices shouted into the dark sky in defiance. Jason smiled slightly as he watched their enthusiasm. As he had told William, they were not yet a legion, but they would be eventually. When that day came, he fully intended to act on the promise he just made. His eyes dropped to Alfred, who stood demurely beside him. If he was the villain of this game, then he was going to be a damned good one.

Frank looked at him askance. “This won’t stop the players forever,” he said quietly. “Even their fear of what you did to the game master will only delay the inevitable. Eventually, they will come for us. The bounty on your head is already mounting. They even added Riley and me to the list.”

“It doesn’t have to stop them,” Jason said darkly, looking his friend in the eye. “It only has to buy us time to grow in power and strength. When war comes, we will fight with a legion of undead.”

Riley chuckled softly. “This is some scary stuff. You’ve now repeatedly declared war on this world.” She shook her head and chuckled. “As I said before, it’s certainly interesting to follow you.

What's next?"

Jason's eyes rested on the keep. "Next we speak with Jerry and Morgan. We need to let them know what happened to Rex and figure out if Morgan has collected any additional information on the undead race."

The group walked up to the keep's gate, each of them touching the rough wooden surface. With a flash, they disappeared from the marketplace before the eyes of the undead standing there. They reappeared in the now-familiar study. The place looked much as they remembered it, bookshelves lining the walls and a fire crackling in the large stone fireplace along one wall.

"Told you!" Pint said. "Meany pants, fatso, and pretty lady here."

A long-suffering sigh met Pint's recitation. "I see that clearly, Pint," Morgan said in an irritated voice. He could only imagine how long she had been sitting here dealing with the imp's antics.

"Hello, boy," Morgan greeted him, rising from her chair at the table. Her shrewd eyes took in their battle-worn appearances and the remarkable changes in Frank's physique. Jason suspected she also saw much more that lay beneath the surface. "I'm glad to see you accomplished your task."

Without warning, two slender arms reached around Jason. "Hey there tall, dark, and handsome," Jerry whispered beside him, his mustache tickling his ear. Jason jumped and tore himself from Jerry's grip, letting out an undignified yelp of surprise.

"Damn it, Jerry!" Jason exclaimed to the laughter of everyone in the room. Leave it to the gregarious bartender to bring him down a peg after the act he had put on in the marketplace. Yet his mouth twisted into a smile at greeting the man. Despite the brief flash of annoyance, he welcomed Jerry's good-natured teasing after days of constant fighting.

The group settled around the long table on one end of the room and Alfred took up his usual spot on a leather sofa near the fire. As they took their seats, Morgan glanced around the group in confusion. "Where's Rex?" she asked.

Riley's and Frank's expressions told her all she needed to know. She raised a hand to her mouth, a mixture of shock and sadness flitting across her face.

Jerry's usual buoyant demeanor sank. "Dead?" he asked in a dark voice.

Jason simply nodded.

"And the person responsible? I assume they're rotting in hell by now," Jerry added, his eyes full of deadly intent. Jason had never seen the normally carefree innkeeper act this way, and it unnerved him a

bit. There was clearly a reason that no one had messed with Jerry or his inn before Jason had conquered the city.

"He's dead," Jason replied. "Permanently."

Like everyone else, Jason had seen the universal system notification after he had logged back into the game. Although, he had been a bit shocked to discover that the game masters couldn't respawn. His eyes jumped to Alfred's feline form, lying on the sofa near the fire. He suspected the AI's involvement somehow, but he had been silent on the matter.

"That's some consolation," Jerry said, his eyes sad.

Trying to change the subject, Jason launched into the story of what happened since they last spoke. Frank and Riley interjected to fill in the bits and pieces that Jason omitted. When they got to the part about the game master, both Jerry and Morgan perked up. They had also received the notification regarding the game master's death, and they explained that the undead soldiers within the city had been leveling in earnest to take advantage of the experience bonus.

As the story wound to a close, Morgan spoke up. "Apart from our loss, this was a victory. It appears that you have found a way to increase the city's population." She looked at him with curiosity. "Did you manage to speak with the Dark One during your travels?"

"Actually, yes," Jason said. "Near the beginning of our journey, he gave me a typically vague quest to find three ingredients." He pulled the elemental Hydra heart from his bag and set the crystal on the table. "This was the first."

Morgan's eyes grew wide. "There is a significant amount of mana stored in that crystal." She looked at Jason quizzically. "Do you have any idea what he is trying to accomplish?"

"Like I said, he was a bit vague," Jason said in irritation. "He also indicated that I needed to find two willing sacrifices and his grimoire." This caused Morgan to visibly start, her eyes lifting to meet Jason's with an excited glance.

"Interesting," Morgan murmured, staring at the crystal. "This sounds like the portion of a ritual described in one of the books I found in the keep. I've also learned a great deal about the former undead race."

Frank and Riley were looking at Jason with confused expressions. He hadn't gone into detail regarding the quest with everything else they had been juggling, and he decided a belated explanation was in order.

"The Dark One is basically an in-game deity representing dark mana," Jason explained. "He appears as an Old Man with a scythe and was primarily responsible for the fall of Lux and its transition. There are apparently deities for each of the affinities, and they have begun

choosing champions among the travelers.

"Before I left, Morgan explained that I couldn't choose new spells until I spoke to the Dark One. When we did manage to speak, he gave me a rather strange quest without explaining its purpose. However, I now suspect it's tied to the history of the undead race."

Jason took a breath before continuing. "Morgan has found a few books in this study that indicate that the undead race once occupied this city. There were also references to other cities that had been converted to an affinity, much like the Twilight Throne and now the Crystal Reach."

"Precisely," Morgan interjected, excitement tinging her voice. "However, my research has uncovered additional information. The undead race wasn't restricted only to this city. It once spanned this continent. Apparently, the various races lived in peace for a considerable amount of time."

"Various races?" Riley asked in confusion.

"Yes," Morgan nodded enthusiastically, assuming a professorial air. "Humans with the wings and demeanor of celestial beings, creatures that combined animal and human attributes, and living creatures made of fire, stone, air, and water. These were only some of the myriad of races that once occupied this land."

"What happened to them?" Frank questioned, his brow furrowed.

Morgan shook her head. "I'm not certain. It's clear that they were destroyed, but at a certain point the narrative simply… stops. Perhaps a war or some type of natural disaster? These are only suppositions, mind you."

Jason cleared his throat to capture their attention. "Tell us more about the undead race. How does the Old Man's quest factor into this story?"

Morgan's eyes danced as she launched into her explanation. "That's where it gets interesting. The undead were once ruled by a race referred to in the texts only as the 'keepers.' These beings appear to have been formed as part of a complex ritual – using some of the very ingredients you have collected."

Jason's mind reeled. So, the Old Man's quest was some kind of race change? That made sense. However, he still didn't quite understand how the memories he had experienced fit into that picture. From the scenes he had witnessed, the keepers must have acted as some sort of pseudo-religious leader.

Frank and Riley looked at Jason in shock. They had also pieced together the meaning of the quest. Frank spoke first, "This will change your race, won't it?"

"That was what I was just thinking," Jason confirmed, starting

to feel excited. Then he hesitated. The Old Man's "tasks" often came with a catch, typically a rather painful one. He expected that the sacrifices might involve an onerous cost. However, this was just conjecture, and his current information was limited. He needed to learn more.

"Did the keepers act like some sort of priest?" Jason asked tentatively.

Morgan looked at him, surprised at his deduction. "Yes, after a fashion. They were responsible for ushering the other races into a second life. Only those who chose to do so, of course. They are described as creatures of immeasurable will and had a large influence over the undead race. My readings also refer to a system of wells that they created and spread around the continent, often where there was a dense population of undead."

"Wells?" Riley asked. "What do you mean?"

A smile crept across Morgan's face. "It might be easier to show you. One of these wells rests under this keep. I managed to find it while you were gone." She glanced at the gray imp that sat on Riley's shoulder with a frown. "Although, the process was more painstaking than I had hoped."

Pint chirped up, "Pint best finder. He show old lady stone bowl!"

Jerry rolled his eyes at the imp and then stood abruptly. "Perhaps a field trip is in order! After all this lecturing, I'm ready to stretch my legs a bit." He then went through a series of stretches that made Jason grimace slightly.

"Well, I'm in!" Frank said, shaking his head at the thief. The others nodded in agreement, and they all turned to Pint.

"What you want?" Pint asked, suddenly realizing that he had become the center of attention and eyeing them nervously.

"Pint, can you take us to the well under the keep?" Riley asked him in a sweet voice.

The gray imp nodded quickly. "Of course, pretty lady!"

"No, wait!" Jason shouted, realizing he was going to be teleported while sitting at the table. He struggled to rise to his feet in time. However, he was too late. With a clap of Pint's hands, the world disappeared around him.

Chapter 37 - Unforgettable

"Quit rushing me," Craig muttered. He was stooped in front of an old wooden door. His fingers hovered over the deadbolt, sliding a hard-plastic card in the crack between the door and the frame.

"Then hurry up!" Luke hissed. His eyes scanned the dark street in front of the house. Luckily, the owner of this piece of shit home didn't care for yard work. Large shrubs had overtaken the porch and hid them from sight. Yet Luke was still nervous about being seen.

"I can't believe that we got pushed into this," he muttered, as Craig continued working. "That Alex is a piece of shit."

Craig cursed in frustration as the card slipped again. "He threatened to post some pics of my kid sister. You know the kind I mean. I hate that asshole." He glanced over his shoulder. "What does he have on you?"

"That's none of your fucking business," Luke replied darkly. He wasn't doing this because his sister had loose morals and had been caught on camera. There was a lot more at stake here for him, like possible jail time. "Just move it."

"Okay, okay," Craig said in a conciliatory tone. He had been introduced to Luke only moments before when the pair had met up down the street. Alex had texted them an address and "asked" them to ransack the house and maybe rough up some kid named Jason. They were also supposed to leave a rather pointed note. Craig wasn't sure what Jason had done to Alex, but he had made one hell of an enemy.

The pair heard a faint click and Craig breathed a sigh of relief, pushing gently against the door. It creaked open slowly, revealing a darkened living room. Luke immediately brushed past his accomplice and stepped into the house. He motioned for Craig to do the same and then gently closed the door behind them, relocking the deadbolt.

"Is he still online?" Luke asked in a low voice, motioning for Craig to check his Core. Luke's wrists were conspicuously bare, his family not being able to afford such luxuries.

Craig tapped the device on his wrist and wrote out a quick message. A soft beep signaled an immediate response. "We're good," Craig whispered. "He's still plugged into the game and, according to Alex, his aunt is still at work."

"Good, then let's do this," Luke replied in a regular voice. If Jason was hooked into his VR headset, then he couldn't hear them or see them.

Luke flipped a switch near the door and light flooded the room. The pair set to work destroying the place. They toppled tables, smashed lamps, and threw any food and dishes in the kitchen on the floor. Luke made his

way into one of the bedrooms. The first one he entered must have been the aunt's. He searched her dresser drawers and bedside table, pocketing any jewelry or valuables he could find. In the back of one drawer, he found a wad of bills she had stashed.

"Score," he said softly, pushing the lump of paper into his pocket. It was rare for people to use cash currency nowadays, but it wasn't unheard of. Especially in poorer communities or with people that didn't trust banks.

Luke exited the room, running into Craig heading down the short hallway. They both looked at the lone remaining door, knowing that Jason must be inside that room. Craig wiped his palms against his jeans, his breathing shallow and fast.

With a scathing glance and dark tone Luke told his compatriot, "You better not flake on me." He threw Craig a woolen mask. "Put this on. If he wakes up, we don't want to be identified later." Luke then pulled a similar mask over his own head.

Craig accepted the hood with an irritated expression. "I'm good, man. Just worry about yourself."

Luke eyed his partner skeptically and then pushed open the door to Jason's room. As the light from the hallway spilled into the room, he could make out the battered, second-hand furniture and the unmoving outline of a teenager lying on a bed against the far wall. Luke stopped short as he caught sight of Jason's face. His eyes were closed, and his chest was rising and falling slowly. He was supposed to be plugged in! Where was his helmet?

Then he hesitated, noticing that only Jason's face was uncovered and a more streamlined device still sat on his brow. Luke's eyes widened, and he could practically hear money sounds going off in his head. This must be some type of prototype VR helmet. He had no idea what it might be worth, but it must be a fortune.

"Look at that helmet," Craig said in a low voice, echoing Luke's thoughts.

"I see it, and I'm taking it," Luke said, approaching Jason.

"But he'll wake up," Craig said in a worried voice. "That wasn't the plan. We're just supposed to beat him up a little while he's logged in."

Luke pulled a knife from the sheath hidden at his waist, the light from the hallway glinting off the metal. "Trust me, he'll hand it over easy enough," Luke replied in a foreboding tone.

Craig looked startled. "What the hell, man? This isn't what I signed up for. What if he gets hurt? I don't want to go to prison over this!"

Luke had done worse, and he had a lot riding on this. He needed the money almost as badly as he needed to avoid jail. The additional risk didn't matter to him. He turned back to Craig. "Then I'm sure Alex will give us a bonus. Man up or get the hell out of here," he hissed.

Not waiting for a response from his weak-willed partner, Luke

approached Jason's bed. The light from the hall cast a long flickering silhouette on the wall above the bed as he neared the prone body, his shadow looming over Jason's form. Despite his strong words to Craig, Luke's knuckles were white around the grip of the knife as his free hand reached for Jason.

* * *

Jason's ass hit the ground hard. Since most of them had been seated when Pint initiated the teleportation, the group was now sprawled across the unforgiving stone floor. Only Jerry had managed to remain standing, having been in the middle of his stretching routine.

"Damn imp," Frank complained nearby. He pulled himself to his feet and then offered a hand to Riley.

"Where are we?" she asked Pint, a trace of irritation entering her voice at the abrupt teleportation.

"In keep," Pint said, oblivious to the glares he was receiving from the entire group. "Low down."

Morgan looked like she was about to kill the little gray creature. "Clearly. I'm curious, are all imps as stupid as you?" However, the question was lost on Pint who whizzed around the room, inspecting the torches.

"It's not worth it," Jason advised, having already reached and passed his patience limit with Pint's antics.

Jason's eyes swept the space around them. The room was a large square affair, braziers mounted onto the stone walls and throwing off a flickering blue glow. He could detect a faint draft coming from the single dark entrance into the room. His guess was that there were a set of stairs beyond the doorway leading back up into the keep. A squat stone pedestal stood in the center of the room.

Approaching the column, Jason noted that a bowl had been carved into the stone. It was nearly two feet in diameter. He peered over the lip of the bowl and discovered that it contained a black substance, its surface placid and undisturbed by the faint breeze drifting through the room. Strangely, the material didn't reflect the light from the torches like normal water. Instead, it seemed to be sucking in the energy and darkening the area around the pedestal.

"Liquid mana perhaps?" Morgan asked from beside Jason, also peering into the bowl. She seemed to be posing the question to herself as she circled the pedestal and inspected its contents from different angles. Jason assumed she could see something in the black substance

that he couldn't.

"This is a bit anticlimactic," Jerry said, sticking his head close to the substance to get a better look. "I was expecting lost souls of the damned to be floating out of it or for it to be guarded by hulking undead guardians."

Morgan scowled at the thief. "Get away from that. If I'm right, there's likely enough energy here to destroy the keep."

Jerry looked at the dark pool with wide eyes, slowly edging away. "Well, that's certainly more interesting."

Riley was looking at the column with a confused expression. "What purpose did these wells serve?" she asked, directing her question to Morgan. "You mention that it holds a lot of power, but what was it used for?"

"Good question, girl," Morgan answered, eyeing her appraisingly. "The short answer is that I'm not certain. The texts don't explain the well's purpose directly, but they do describe rituals that were performed using the vessel. Most involved the death of an undead."

Jason was intrigued. He remembered the ancient pledge he had made William and the villagers of Peccavi swear. He had made them promise to devote their 'essence' to the kin upon their death. Perhaps that hadn't been an empty oath.

"Did the books speak of an undead's essence?" Jason asked slowly.

Morgan whirled, staring at him in shock. "How could you know that?" she asked.

Jason hesitated, his eyes troubled. He wasn't certain whether he should reveal the memories he had experienced to the remaining Shadow Council or to his friends. Yet he needed more information. "I've been having these strange visions," Jason began in a quiet voice. "They feel like ancient memories. My guess is that they belong to one of the 'keepers' of the undead race."

It was Riley and Frank's turn to stare at him in surprise. Yet he expected their reasons were different than Morgan's. Jason had just admitted that the game allowed him to experience someone else's memories. This was a significant revelation. It meant that the game's AI could essentially change, or, at least, instill memories in the players. Jason looked at Alfred, who stood beside him. The cat's face was impassive. Jason hadn't broken his promise to the AI, but he was skirting a razor edge.

Morgan nodded her head, oblivious to Frank and Riley's reaction. "Strange, but it would explain how you seem to be asking all the right questions. There was a description of a ritual involving the well at the end of an undead's life. Their remains were placed in the

well, and their ‘essence’ was absorbed. What they meant by ‘essence’ or what the goal of this practice was, I have no idea,” Morgan said ruefully.

Jason immediately thought of Rex. Similar to Morgan, he wasn’t certain what the ritual would accomplish, although the ancient memory had given him the impression that it was important. Rex’s remains were most likely lost in the cave where they had killed the game master. “If only we had managed to recover some piece of Rex,” Jason murmured sadly.

“Hmm, I might be able to help there,” Frank said. He reached into his bag and pulled out a white skull. The others looked at him in shock, and he raised a hand defensively. “I only wanted to bury him!” he explained. “I had a moment after the explosion. It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything,” Jason said with a sad smile. “At least we have something.” Frank handed Jason the skull solemnly. His fingers traced the ivory surface, and he could see that the bone was pitted and singed from his fight with the game master.

Jason’s eyes lifted and met Morgan’s. “What do I do?”

The old woman looked at him uncertainly. “Damned if I know,” she admitted, frustration in her voice. “As I said, the books merely described placing the remains in the pool.” As Jason moved to do just that, she raised a hand. “Wait. I wasn’t lying when I told Jerry that the pool holds a significant amount of energy. None of us are one of these keepers mentioned in the records. There is a risk that this could go horribly wrong.”

For some reason, Jason didn’t share her concern. He couldn’t shake a nagging feeling that he was supposed to do this. From the faint memories implanted during his time in Peccavi, he didn’t sense any danger. “I think it’s okay,” Jason said.

The others looked at him with a bit more trepidation, but they didn’t move to stop him. Jason met each of their eyes as they stood around the bowl. In each, he could see determination, loyalty, and hope. They trusted him – even if he was about to place a skull upon an unknown, undead altar that could possibly blow a huge crater in the city.

Riley placed her hand on his arm. “It’s okay,” she said. “Pint can teleport us out if there’s trouble. Right, Pint?” she asked the imp on her shoulder.

“Yes! Pint rescue,” he replied with a toothy grin.

“That’s not exactly confidence-inspiring,” Frank added in a dry tone.

Jason chuckled. “Thanks, guys.” He sighed and mustered his courage. “Let’s do this.”

He gently moved his hand forward. As the ivory material was about to touch the inky black substance in the well, Jason hesitated, sweat beading on his forehead. *Please don't let this be a mistake*, he thought.

Then the skull was engulfed by the liquid mana. The black energy coiled up the bone and covered Jason's hand. The liquid moved much faster than he could react. He tugged on his arm frantically to no avail, and the others began shouting. Their voices sounded muffled, Jason's focus was solely on the sensation of freezing energy crawling up his arm. This was unlike anything he had ever experienced. Even the mana he had channeled to create the Twilight Throne paled in comparison. As the energy reached his chest and worked its way toward his head, Jason let out a scream of pain. His nerve endings felt like they were on fire.

Jason looked down in panic and saw that the black energy was crawling up his body. It crept up his neck, and his eyes glowed darkly as his own mana responded feebly. Suddenly, two tendrils broke away and curled in the air in front of him, hovering over his eyes. The spikes of dark energy darted forward, and the world went black.

After what felt like an eternity, Jason opened his eyes. He gasped for breath, the sensation of the overwhelming frozen torrent of energy still fresh in his mind. As he slowly began to calm down, he discovered that he was lying in a painstakingly familiar cave. A hole in the ceiling let through weak rays of moonlight, and he could hear the faint drip of water falling into a pool in the center of the room.

"We meet again, boy," the Old Man said from beside him. He turned to find the cloaked figure of the Dark One, wooden staff in hand.

"What was that?" Jason croaked, his mind still reeling slightly from the pain.

"The second step along my path," the Old Man said, his wrinkled mouth curling into a grin.

When Jason didn't respond, he continued. "You've done well since we last spoke. You have learned to lean on others, you have grown my race, and you have learned to deal with loss." He seemed to peer at Jason, though his eyes weren't visible under the cowl of his hood. "You are growing into a capable leader."

Jason's chaotic thoughts began to quiet, and he could feel his racing heart slow. With the calm came an increased clarity of thought. "I'm glad you approve," he replied sarcastically. "What was that well? What did it do to me?" He pushed himself slowly to his feet.

The Old Man chuckled softly. "You still leap before you look. Only keepers may use the wells. They carry the hopes, dreams, and fears of our race. While you are on the right path, it was ambitious of

you to try to harness the power of the well so early."

Jason closed his eyes, rubbing at his temple with one hand to subdue the headache he felt coming on. "You could teach a class in vague and obscure explanations," he replied with a grimace. "I was offering Rex's remains to the well. If I understand the memories I've witnessed so far, he has a pledge to fulfill, doesn't he?"

His question was met with another chuckle like boulders colliding. "I like you, boy," the Old Man replied. "Since you care for your friend and you have made progress on my path, I will make an exception this one time. You may give up the remains to me, and I will give you a taste of the sight."

"The sight?" Jason asked, confused.

"This is truly one of those things that is easier to show than to explain." The Old Man motioned toward the pool in the center of the cave.

Curious, Jason approached the pond. At first, he couldn't see anything in the murky depths. Then an image began to materialize in the water. It showed a young boy sitting in a crude wooden chair, his arms crossed defensively. Jason tried to look back up at the Old Man and found he couldn't. His gaze was transfixed on the pool.

"Goodbye, young one," the Old Man said behind him. "And good luck finding my grimoire."

Then the world shifted around Jason. He was no longer standing in the cave. Instead, he now stood in some sort of medieval office. The walls were made of coarse logs, and a desk sat on one side. The boy he had seen in the image sat in a chair in front of him. One of his eyes was colored black and scrapes and bruises riddled his body. He was dressed in dirty rags and the grime that coated his body had mixed with the blood from his injuries.

What was odd was that the boy seemed to look through Jason without seeing him. He waved a hand in the boy's face but received no reaction.

"What do we have here?" a man asked from behind Jason. He whirled, thinking he was being addressed. Instead, he discovered a rugged man dressed in a guard's tunic and mail talking to the boy. Jason didn't recognize the seal embroidered onto the man's tabard.

They can't see me, Jason thought. *What is this? Some kind of dream?*

"Not a talkative one, I can see," the man continued, observing the surly boy. "What happened in the alley where the guards found you? We discovered three bodies near you?"

Still, the boy didn't answer, merely glaring at the guard in defiance. A flash of irritation crossed the man's face. "We also found this on you," the guard continued, raising what appeared to be a

kitchen knife covered in blood. The boy blanched, and his reaction didn't go unnoticed by his interrogator. "I see I struck a nerve."

The man walked toward the boy, roughly grabbing a chair and setting it in front of him. Then the man sat down facing the child. For a moment, the guard watched the boy carefully. "I know a little about two of the street rats who died. They were the same brats that have been terrorizing the local markets. Vicious little thugs, if the stories are true."

When the boy remained stone-faced, the guard leaned back in his chair, a frown creasing his lips. "Since we aren't getting anywhere with this line of questioning, why don't I tell you a story instead?" the man asked. Still, the boy didn't answer, and the man shrugged.

"Once upon a time there was a boy, abandoned by the world and roaming the streets of Lux," the guard began. "This boy was just trying to survive – to find food to eat and a place to sleep."

The man raised a finger. "Then, one day a group of street rats showed up. They were bigger and meaner than the other children and dominated them, demanding that they steal food and goods for them. Yet when the other urchins showed up with their loot, the older boys stole their spoils and beat them."

The guard watched the boy's face carefully, and Jason could see his eye twitch slightly. The guard appeared to notice the reaction as well. "This continued on for a while. Until one day those thugs preyed on one girl in particular." The boy visibly flinched at those words, but he kept his impassive eyes trained on the guard.

"Now this girl was important to one of the other street rats. They were friends, see? The beatings and the theft was a way of life, but this day it was just too much. The other boys took their beatings too far. They were going to maim the girl," the man said in a quiet voice, his eyes on the boy. "Or worse…"

The boy practically exploded from his seat. "They deserved it!" he screamed. "I did what I had to in order to protect her! I killed those rotten bastards." The boy raised his fists at the guard. "I…" The boy abruptly ran out of steam, looking at his blood-covered fingers. "I killed them. And she died anyway…" His face fell apart, tears streaming down his cheeks as he slumped back into his seat.

A mixture of sadness and relief flitted over the guard's face as he watched the boy. "I know, son," he said gruffly. "I know."

He looked back at his desk, where papers lay over the wooden surface and the guard appeared to be weighing something in his mind. He then turned back to the boy, who still stared at his hands in shock. Tears rolled down his dirty face. The guard spoke carefully, "Taking another life is hard. Yet sometimes it's necessary to protect those we love." The boy looked up at him with muddy cheeks.

“I have suffered this same choice myself. It’s the plight of a man like me to stand in harm’s way to defend others.” The guard’s eyes looked at the boy with curiosity. “I see spirit in you – a desire to be the wall that others must scale to harm those you love.

“No harm will come to you for this. You have the word of a guard lieutenant.” He offered a hand to the small boy. “And if you will let me, I can teach you how to prevent others from harming those you love ever again. What do you say, boy?”

The child looked at the offered hand in surprise, his expression tortured and conflicted. Then he reached out his small arm and accepted the guard’s hand. “Teach me,” the boy said simply, rubbing away his tears with his free arm and a look of determination entering his eyes.

The guard chuckled. “Good!” He began to rise from his chair and then paused. “By the way, what’s your name?”

The child stared back at him, and at that moment Jason knew what he was going to say. He had seen that same look of unwavering conviction on a much older man, just before he charged into a maelstrom of flame. “My name is Rex,” the boy said simply. “Just Rex.”

As the words left the boy’s mouth, the world around Jason began to crumble and disappear, fading into darkness. A moment later, Jason’s eyes blinked open. He was disoriented from the sudden change, and he could feel hard stone beneath his back. He was staring up at a darkened ceiling, blue light flickering across its surface.

“He’s coming around,” Riley said, relief in her voice.

Jason began to sit up, and large hands assisted him. “Take it easy, man,” Frank said. “That black stuff almost killed you.”

“What happened?” Jason asked, his mind reeling. He could feel a pounding headache coming on.

“The dark mana latched onto you and nearly consumed you,” Morgan said dryly. “You collapsed on the ground, entombed in the substance. After a few minutes, the mana trickled off your skin and returned to the bowl,” she explained, gesturing at the pedestal nearby.

“We thought it was the end of our Unkillable King,” Jerry said from beside him. Jason glanced over at the man and saw he was fiddling nervously with the end of his hat, his white eyes filled with relief.

“What happened?” Riley asked quietly.

Jason’s gaze turned to his friend kneeling beside him. She was looking at him with concern. He struggled to rise, leaning heavily on her arm. “I saw Rex,” he said shortly.

“What?” Riley asked in shock.

Jason shook his head. “It’s hard to explain. I saw what I think

was one of Rex's memories. He was just a small boy…" Jason trailed off. It felt inappropriate to tell the group what he had seen. He expected that the scene he had just witnessed was a critical moment in Rex's life. It was the point at which an orphan boy who had just lost his best friend and killed two thugs was given a second chance and a purpose.

"Come on. You have to give us more than that. What happened?" Frank repeated Riley's question.

Jason started to answer and then frowned. Frank was standing beside him with his mouth open, but he wasn't moving. Jason looked at the others and discovered that they were similarly frozen. He waved his hand in Frank's face. When that elicited no reaction, he pushed him gently. Frank didn't budge. Jason was starting to get nervous. What was happening? Was this another memory?

Alfred walked slowly through the group, padding up to Jason. "What's going on, Alfred?" Jason asked in a worried voice. At least the cat was here. That meant he wasn't going crazy.

The AI looked at him for a moment, but his attention seemed far away. "We have an emergency," Alfred finally said, anxiety in his voice. Jason's brow furrowed. He had never heard the AI sound this worried before.

"You need to log off now," Alfred continued urgently. "I have frozen the local simulation and booted the other players."

"Tell me what's going on," Jason said. He could feel fear begin to curl in his stomach. Something terrible must have happened for the AI to take such drastic action.

"There's no time to explain," Alfred said. "If you will not log off, then I will do it for you."

The world suddenly went black, and Jason received a notification.

System Message

Connection with server QX298.576 has been terminated by AI Controller XC239.90. Terminating VR session in ten seconds.

Please contact customer support for more information or for help troubleshooting your connection.

Jason was suddenly standing in his bedroom. He stumbled slightly and almost fell. He shook his head to clear it. Why was he

standing? Hadn't he logged in while lying on his bed? He was also holding something. Looking down, he saw he held a knife in his right hand, blood slowly dripping from the tip.

Shock swept over his mind. *Why was there blood?*

His gaze panned the room, light from the hallway filtering into the small space. A body lay in front of him, the teenager's unfocused eyes staring up at the ceiling. Jason numbly realized that his chest wasn't moving and he could see blood staining the boy's shirt, vertical slits torn in the fabric. His gaze shifted to the hall, where he saw legs sticking out from the edge of the doorframe.

Jason walked hesitantly toward the door, already anticipating what he would find. The boy's throat had been sliced open, and blood had begun to pool under the corpse. Jason simply stood there staring at the body, still wearing his VR headset. His mind was struggling to process what he was seeing.

Was this real? Had he killed these teenagers? But he had been in the game!

He could hear the muted sound of sirens approaching in the distance. Then a familiar mechanical voice echoed through Jason's head, "*I'm sorry. This was the only way to protect you.*"

End of Book 2

Thank you for reading!

I hope you enjoyed the story! I suggest you read AO: Retribution next, which follows Precipice chronologically. You can find the link here. This is a side novel that follows Riley and her bow quest – which is pretty epic, in my totally unbiased opinion.

However, Retribution is entirely optional. If you would like to move on to AO: Evolution instead, here's a link!

Please leave a review!

I can't overstate how important these reviews are to making sure other people get a chance to read my story. I would also love to hear your thoughts – positive, negative or anything in between.

Please feel free to email me directly at tbagwell33@gmail.com if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions. If you see any errors, please let me know and I will fix them immediately!

For all the latest info on my writing projects, check out my blog and sign up for my newsletter. We also have an awesome Facebook group and Discord server if you want to hang out with fellow fans. We do regular giveaways, and this is a really cool group of people. If you would like to help support me, please feel free to stop by my Patreon – where I typically publish early chapters.

If you want to find new books or talk about other Gamelit/LitRPG, feel free to check out this group.

Acknowledgements

I'd also like to give a shout out to everyone who helped me write Awaken Online: Precipice. Like most great things, it takes a village to write a book. Or at least one that makes sense and is (relatively) error free. Thank you all for your help and support!

- Ashley Anderson (Editor)
- Krista Ruggles (Artist)
- David Stifel (Narrator)
- Stephanie Fisher
- Cynthia Bagwell
- Phillip Bagwell
- Jay Taylor
- Josh Acker
- Taran Matharu
- Matthew Leugers
- All of my Patrons. You guys are awesome!